Chapter 1

The monsoons had continued into June, but today the skies were clear. Not a single raindrop darkened the brilliant, shining sun. However, from noon onward, grey clouds gathered and blanketed the sky. Then soon after one o'clock, almost as if the weather were punishing him personally, all hell broke loose and the ferocious downpour began.

Holding a vinyl umbrella he had purchased at a convenience store, Anna Kaitani ran down the sidewalk, the multicolored canopy weaving in and among the other umbrellas. He stepped in a puddle, drenching the cuffs of his slacks, but he hardly noticed. Turning the corner, he ran up a short incline and darted into the entranceway of the Cavi Cosmetics building.

He stopped in front of the automatic doors, which opened a beat later than he expected. A trivial matter, yet it somehow irritated him. Damn, he said, with a cluck of his tongue.

Sprinting through the atrium, his eyes met those of Hiromi Sasaguri, seated at the reception booth at the front of the lobby. She mincingly raised her hand to her mouth and giggled. Without thinking, he averted his eyes. In his frantic state, he knew he was a wet train wreck.

The elevator descended to the first floor. He

leapt on, and at last stopped to catch his breath. He looked down at his dripping black satchel and his sopping wet shoes. He didn't have a towel and had forgotten his handkerchief. His legs were chilled from his knees down. All he could do was wait for his trousers to air dry.

He got off at the fifth floor and hurried into an office identified over the doorframe as the Sales Promotion & Planning Department.

The doorway was narrow, but the interior was wide. Spacious aisles generously separated the twenty or so desks. The desks were large, and the short, paneled partitions separating them imparted a sense of privacy while not being claustrophobic.

Kaitani had entered his third year at the firm. His desk was in the center of the room, off to the side in front of the office supplies cabinet. He set his soaking satchel on the floor with a wet thud. Sitting at the desk opposite his, Ritsuko Kuge glanced over the partition at him. She was his immediate superior, and eight years his senior.

"Kaitani!" she barked. "You're late! The meeting started at two o'clock. It's already begun!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know." With still-damp hands, he scraped together the materials scattered across his desk.

"Not a terribly pleasant attitude, that. I just might forget to tell you they moved the meeting from Conference Room 5 to Room 8."

"They did?"

He raised his head, hands full. Their eyes met. Kuge sniffed and laughed. "Osada was supposed to stick a Post-it on your computer, but I guess you didn't see it. Well, get moving. Section Chief Fujiwara is going to be irked."

Grabbing the rest of the conference materials and a notepad, he rushed out of the office.

Both elevators descended all the way to the first floor before coming up again. Standing there twiddling his thumbs aggravated him to no end; the meeting was on the eighteenth floor, so using the stairs was out of the question. It was thirty minutes past two o'clock when he finally arrived at Room 8.

He paused in front of the door, took a deep breath, shook the nervousness out of system, and walked in. "Kaitani from Sales Promotion. I apologize for being late," he announced, bowing deeply at the same time.

Dead silence greeted him. He slowly raised his head. Fifteen people were sitting around an elliptical table in the middle of the conference room. They all looked at him. It wasn't warm in the room, but he felt sweat beading on his forehead.

He searched for an empty chair. There was only one left, right next to Sales Promotion & Planning Department Section Chief Yasuhito Fujiwara. God, Kaitani thought to himself, but there no other seats available. He hunched over and crept along the wall until he got to the chair and sat down. The heady cologne the Section Chief always wore wafted up, making him tense. It was a conditioned reflex.

"Sorry about being late to such an important meeting," he apologized in a small voice.

Fujisawa continued to stare straight ahead, sparing him not a glance, not even a "Don't let it happen again." Utterly and completely ignoring him was Fujiwara's intimidating way of showing his displeasure.

Kaitani stole a glance at his watch: the meeting started thirty minutes ago. The main topic on the day's agenda was a new product the Research & Development department was presenting for comment and review. He didn't know how far the discussion had progressed. Completely at a loss, he felt a surreptitious nudge at his right shoulder.

He turned to his right and found Yuka Osada glaring at him. Osada was three years his senior. "You're half an hour late," she rebuked him under her breath. "What's going on?"

"Sorry. I was delayed returning from an outside assignment."

The fierce expression on her face didn't falter. She drew her eyebrows together. "Give me the whole story afterwards. Right now, they've finished the descriptions of the new lotion product and are handing out samples."

Kaitani grabbed one of the items off the table. Next spring, Cavi Cosmetics was rolling out a new line of men's self-care products and further expanding into the upscale convenience store market. Kaitani was a member of the sales promotion team for the new KASHA line.

As a "team member," Kaitani sat in on meetings, but with only three years of tenure, he wasn't expected to voice opinions about the merchandise. As the low man on the totem pole, his job was to be "present." He knew he wasn't of much use, but not much was expected of him, either. Nevertheless, his name was on the team roster, so he had to attend.

KASHA was based on the original CHAPS line of men's cosmetics, with minor changes. To put it bluntly, the only thing that had really changed was the name. The contents were substantially the same.

In the KASHA line of basic cosmetics for men, they had settled on three new products: a facial wash, shaving lotion, and a skin lotion. The mock-ups of the facial wash and shaving lotion had been demo'd at the last joint conference, and a launch date set. The skin lotion was still in development and the release of the prototypes were delayed a month.

Kaitani glanced over the goods and picked up a plastic container labeled "003." When he opened the lid and tipped it upside down, a thick, muddy-white liquid dripped down onto his palm. Huh, he thought.

The skin lotion that Kaitani used on a daily basis (another company's product, a fact he would not admit upon pain of death) was silky and aqueous. He knew there were similar types of women's beauty washes, but this was rare for a men's product. When he applied a bit to his face, he could tell it was much more moist than what he used, but without that goopy, smearing sensation. It also had the unique aroma, similar to summer grass.

When he put the lid back on the container and lifted his head, he felt every eye on the place focused on him. He gulped. Had anyone made any kind of pronouncement since he'd entered the conference room? It had been quiet all along. Since this was a prototype review session, he'd expected a livelier give and take.

"Kaitani-kun," Section Chief Fujiwara abruptly said.

Kaitani snapped to attention. Fujiwara looked at him. His narrow, almond eyes, which the female employees described as in a constant state of ennui, communicated an attitude far beyond cheerlessness, a hundred degrees below zero.

"Y-Yes," Kaitani replied in a strained voice.

"Let's hear your honest evaluation of sample 003."

Anything but an evaluation. He hadn't read the product documentation. He'd just picked the thing up. He didn't have time to gather his thoughts together. Nevertheless, he had the distinct feeling that if he had to say something or he was toast. He opened his mouth and said awkwardly, "Well, um, it seems pretty good to me."

"What specifically is good about it?"

As Fujiwara pinned him down, cold sweat prickled Kaitani's back. His throat went dry. He felt that with the next thing he said, he'd make a fool of himself. "If nothing else, the feel of this lotion is comparable to a woman's product. I find it interesting."

Fujiwara said nothing, except for a slight sigh at the end. He turned to his attention elsewhere. "Osada-san, what do you think of this lotion?"

"Yes, indeed." Osada picked up the container and leaned forward. "Personally, I like this kind of texture, but I have some doubts about whether it would be acceptable in a product for men. Our data shows that men prefer a bracing and refreshing feeling in their skin care cosmetics."

"We've seen the same market survey results," stated Yuichi Higashiyama from R&D.

Kaitani had previously worked with Higashiyama on the research team for a women's skin care line. Earlier in his career, Higashiyama had researched Japanese and Chinese botanicals at a pharmaceutical company, and he was quite knowledgeable about their efficacy. He was accomplished and proactive. In his rookie year, not twelve months on the job, he'd become the star of the R&D department. He was helpful, had a strong sense of responsibility—a dependable, big-brother type.

He was handsome, though not vain, and big-hearted and generous. Even though Kaitani belonged to another department, he wished Higashiyama were his boss. Higashiyama watched out for him, and even after the research team broke up, on several occasions they'd dined together. He wore rich cologne and always sported a laid-back attitude. If the Section Chief were a cat, he'd be a Siamese who only ate gourmet canned cat food. Higashiyama was exactly the opposite—friendly and easy going.

"Based on the survey results, we went ahead and decided on this texture. It's a subtle way of differentiating us from the competition. With its increased viscosity, the moisturizing effect is twice that of existing products."

Section Chief Fujiwara narrowed his eyes slowly leaned forward. He doubled-up his right hand and rested it lightly against his cheek.

Higashiyama continued, "Beyond form and feel, these lotions must emphasize function. With this rollout, we're targeting men from their teens to their twenties. Their primary skin concern is acne. The biggest cause of acne is dryness and bacteria accumulating in the pores. In our research, many respondents said that despite washing their faces regularly, their acne didn't clear up. Moreover, overwashing strips away essential moisture and stimulates the secretion of sebum. We're focusing on maintaining a moderate level of skin moisture and checking production of sebum. We're also developing compounds that better absorb skin oils."

With these objectives in mind, the thickened feel and flow of the lotion were understandable. What at first had been puzzling began to make sense. Higashiyama again picked up the lotion container. "So, if you follow the reasoning as I've outlined it here—"

In the short moment of silence that followed, Fujiwara spoke up. "Sales Promotion will not approve of this product going to market."

The murmurs of hushed conversations rustled around the quiet room. The R&D members all looked at each other, sour looks rising to their faces.

"What about it do you find unacceptable?" R&D Department Head Hiroe Takanaga asked, in a soft tone of voice. She was single, forty-six, and devoted her life to research. Even though approaching middle age, her smooth skin was known about the department as "skin of the Gods."

"This product does not meet my expectations."

A testy wrinkle appeared between her eyebrows.

Invisible bolts of lightning rent the air between them throwing off sparks. Nobody spoke. The suffocating tension made Kaitani gulp.

"As far as the lotion is concerned, R&D is confident that they have produced the best possible product." The expression on her face accompanying this unequivocal statement made clear her complete faith in their work. "This lotion is fundamentally different than all other products to date. Although delivered in the form of a lotion, functionally it integrates the effectiveness of the three classes of women's products: lotions, beauty creams and emulsions or moisturizers. Use it, and the differences become obvious."

Section Chief Fujiwara leaned back in his chair, listening with a disinterested air. A total outsider could tell he was in a bad mood. "As Dr. Takanaga has indicated, the effectiveness of the lotion is not in question. But this argument is beside the point."

Fujiwara picked up the container labeled "003" with his fingertips. He shook his hand back and forth. The creamy liquid languidly sloshed back and forth in the clear bottle.

"The first problem is the scent. I don't care how good it is, but I'd never use anything with that grassy-smelling odor. Among the young men interested in using cosmetic products, a fair number of them prefer richer fragrances. Even in our survey results, sixty percent of men who use our products say they are interested in the fragrance, or in fact are using a scented product. This scent, which is anything but that kind of fragrance, will kill consumer demand."

There was a loud crash. Takanaga leapt to her feet, energetically enough that she almost tipped over her chair. "We'll further investigate the scent. But as for the product itself—"

"The second problem is the texture."

Speaking with a slightly bored expression, Section Chief Fujiwara opened the lid of the container and spilled some of the thick, muddy white liquid into his palm. "The viscosity is too high."

"As I've said, it was designed that way. This is obvious when touching it, but its viscous nature only comes into play when it first touches the skin. When it is spread out, it directly permeates the skin and the surface texture quickly turns silky."

Section Chief Fujiwara narrowed his eyes and shook his head. "This is not a product for women, but for men. Women's products do have this kind of texture, but men's products are different."

"I know that. That is why—"

"If you know it, then do it. I can't sell this based on its efficacy alone. People will buy something even half as effective. This is a business, after all. I don't want to hear about anything that's going to detract from our ability market the product."

Takanaga looked like she was grinding her back teeth.

"I've said all I'm going to in regards to the rejection of this prototype. I expect that by next time some improvements will have been made."

Section Chief Fujiwara gathered up his materials and left the conference room. Osada and the rest of the Sales Promotion department members hurriedly followed him. Kaitani would have been happy to tag along but, being the last one to arrive, it would be rude to leave ahead of anybody else. As he lingered there, he was a juicy fat target for the remaining nine R&D staff members, who shot icy glares in his direction.

"Sales Promotion is fixated on sales, sales, sales," spit out a young man about his same age.

"Do you know how long it took us to perfect that lotion? It's not something you knock out in a day or two. Half a year. Half a year! It doesn't smell right, he says. I don't like the texture, he says. Who cares if it barely works, he can still sell it. You buy all that bullshit?"

"Hey, sorry, but don't put this all on me. I thought it was great." Kaitani hung his head, rounding his back.

"Give it a rest. Blaming one person won't solve our problems. There's still room for improvement on our side." This just wasn't anybody covering for him but Higashiyama. He went on, "With the scent, we were trying to impart a strong sense of the Oriental, but as Section Chief Fujiwara pointed out, it could turn off customers looking for a more fragrant product. We might want to cut it back a bit."

The R&D members remained silent. Having kept her peace thus far, Department Head Hiroe Takanaga rose to her feet and spoke calmly. "Frankly, simply hearing the mention of sales burns me up as well, but the reality is, if the product doesn't sell, we're out of a job. Section Chief Fujiwara is a marketing professional. If he's against it, then I think that by itself means something. We going to have to figure out a way to compromise and get along. At any rate, let's go back and wrap things up."

The R&D personnel left one by one. The dust having finally settled; the sense of relief Kaitani felt was like the last whiff of energy escaping from his body. Somebody clapped him on the shoulder. Higashiyama said, "Sorry about them taking it out on you like that."

He apologized as if Kaitani might have taken great offense. Kaitani shook his head vigorously. "Hey, it's okay. I can take it. You know, it's not like I don't understand where you R&D guys are coming from. Section Chief Fujiwara has a very direct way of speaking. I think the lotion is pretty good, but my opinion apparently doesn't count for much. When I get back I'll try pressing him on the matter a bit more."

Higashiyama smiled wryly, as if to say, Don't press your luck. "There's room for improvement on our end as well. Moreover, when it comes to sales, Section Chief Fujiwara is the one with the street cred. If something looks wrong to him, then there probably is something wrong with it."

He didn't look happy admitting it, but he flashed Kaitani a concerned smile. Looking around, Kaitani saw that everybody had pulled up stakes and left. They were the only two remaining people in the conference room.

Higashiyama said, "When you've got the time, let's go out for a drink. I heard Imakura found a place that serves a great white wine. He said he'd like you to give it a try, too."

Imakura was a waiter Kaitani had met through

Higashiyama. Imakura aspired to be a sommelier and had an encyclopedic knowledge of wine. He knew Kaitani liked white wine, and gave him a heads-up whenever he made a delicious new discovery. He was older than Kaitani, the same age as Section Chief Fujiwara, but being a bit baby-faced, at glance you might take him for a high school student.

"Really? I can pretty much make the time whenever. Give me a call."

Higashiyama chuckled. "Later," he said, and left the conference room.

As the last one there, Kaitani switched the sign on the door from "Occupied" to "Vacant" and got on the elevator.

In the slowly descending elevator, Kaitani again thought about what was wrong with the lotion. Its viscous feel was unusual, true, but if it worked, he'd like to try it out himself. About the time he'd concluded that only Section Chief Fujiwara's personal opinions and prejudices were behind the rejection of the lotion, the elevator arrived at the fifth floor.

He got all the way back to his desk and was about to sit down when he heard his named being called: "Kaitani-kun." A low, resonating voice. When he turned his head, Section Chief Fujiwara, chin in his hand, was staring at him across the room.

With a bad feeling in his stomach, Kaitani approached the big desk by the windows. Standing in front of the desk, the distinctive odor wafted around him. Nobody knew exactly what fragrance it was, and Section Chief Fujiwara wouldn't say. Among the female

employees, the source of his cologne had become one of the Seven Wonders of the company. Currently, the popular buzz was that he had commissioned a "Fujiwara Original" from a professional perfumer.

Some of the female employees said the scent turned them on. As far as Kaitani was concerned, like that theme from Jaws, the smell meant he was about to become shark bait. As accomplishments went, it was nothing to write home about, but in the three years since joining the company and being assigned to the Sales Promotion & Planning Department, Kaitani had never been censured or praised. He associated the smell of that cologne with Section Chief speaking. It meant he was in for a tongue-lashing.

Yasuhito Fujiwara had become Section Chief of the Sales Promotion & Planning Department at the age of thirty-two. For a variety of reasons, he was famous throughout the company, and was placed in a separate category than those of his same generation.

First of all, there was his appearance: prim to the point of becoming off-putting. His head was small in proportion to his tall body. He was thin, yet his physique was tight and well-muscled. You could tell even with his suit on. He had a slender face and a tall nose. His almond eyes often seemed filled with melancholy. Whether true or not nobody knew, but rumors abounded that many years ago he'd had an affair with one of the cosmetics models.

His slightly long hair was always beautifully coiffured, and he never wore off-the-rack suits. His was the style of the noblesse oblige, of the prototypical man you saw in fashion magazines. Men who saw him on the street no doubt envied him, saying to themselves, There goes a real man, the kind of man I'd like to become.

However, when Kaitani was around him, he knew Fujiwara did it His Way, and His Way stuck in his craw and held him at bay. Though these sentiments might have struck a more accomplished man than himself as mere prejudice.

Given that Fujiwara was a handsome man, with fine taste in clothing and accouterments, and possessed by some vague and unique sorrow, no woman could leave him alone. The rumors typically involved Fujiwara and somebody at the company. In as little as three to six months, the rumor mill turned and new players filled the roles.

He flirted with outrageous women and was known as a regular Don Juan around town. Yet for all these ostentatious relationships—many of the women at the company shunned him—girls didn't stop trying to hook up with him.

The reason was simple: Fujiwara didn't only have his looks going for him. He was exceedingly good at his job. This far in his career, he hadn't failed at a single task he'd ever taken on. Putting him into the sales game reliably meant the difference between a single and a home run. His superiors trusted him, and it was even said that if Fujiwara in Sales Promotion and Planning didn't sign off on your project, you might as well throw in the towel.

When he was hired, Kaitani had been honestly impressed by the fact that Fujiwara had what it took to become a manager in his twenties. More recently, though, he had come to question the man's management style.

To date, their jobs had twice put them together on the same product development team, and Kaitani had learned that Fujiwara's approach was thoroughly market-driven. The first priority was reaching and pleasing the consumer; nothing else mattered. Regardless of what cutting-edge idea R&D put forward, if it didn't conform to the consumer surveys and historical sales data, he'd cut the proposition to pieces.

Kaitani got the feeling that Fujiwara was a machine manipulated by information; creating something should be a more human act. Just as in high school, when the class put on a play or performance for the school festival, he felt there should be that same sense of solidarity and accomplishment. When working with Fujiwara, everything good or bad about something came down to whether it sold or didn't sell. There wasn't any room for personal sentiment.

Ritsuko Kuge, in comparison, was about the same age as Fujiwara, but she brought the human touch to her work style. That's why Kaitani enjoyed working with Kuge. Yet, for somebody in his position, barely one-step above the janitor, he didn't have the power to choose his superiors.

"The meeting ended fifteen minutes ago. What have you been up to?" Fujiwara spoke in barbed, bass tones. The look in his impassive eyes said accusingly, You come to the meeting late and then play hooky?

"I was talking with some of the R&D people about the prototypes."

Although he couldn't make excuses about being late to the meeting, his conversations after the meetings were work-related. He wanted at least to eliminate any misunderstandings in that case. Even if all the criticisms during the meeting came from just one perspective—

Fujiwara slowly smoothed down the part in his hair, though there hadn't been a hair out of place to begin with. "The prototype was rejected. I didn't think there was anything more to discuss."

"But you have to take their feelings into account as well, don't you? After all, they worked hard coming up with those prototypes."

Fujiwara laughed though his nose. "This is a business, Kaitani. When they make things that won't sell, it's the job of R&D to improve the product so it will. There is no need to insert emotions into the equation beyond what is necessary. And your responsibilities lie elsewhere. You don't have the time to be nursing other people's feelings."

On top of being sniffed at, being told he "didn't have the time" really pissed Kaitani off. No matter what he said to this data machine, this poor excuse for a man, nothing was going to get through to him. "I understand," he muttered in apology.

Section Chief Fujiwara touched his hand to his cheek and gave a small sigh. "Please communicate to R&D that the next meeting will be on the afternoon of Friday, July 12th, starting at one o'clock."

With a token nod of his head, Kaitani began his retreat, until the words, "And after that—" stopped him. Oh, God, what else is he going to say? he thought, turning around.

"I noticed at the meeting that the cuff of your suit is dirty."

When Kaitani hastily raised his right arm, Fujiwara's steely glare told him to look at his left. Checking his left sleeve, he saw it was muddied with some light brown substance. When he drew his face closer, he caught a sweet, spicy odor. Today at lunch, while running his errands, he'd stopped for his favorite okonomiyaki. That's undoubtedly where he'd picked up the stain. While it was pretty obvious, you couldn't see it looking on, so he hadn't noticed until it was pointed out to him.

"Do you have another suit coat you can change into?"

Kaitani blinked several times, his mouth half-open. He didn't usually keep a spare suit at the company. Wondering why in the world Fujiwara was asking him such a thing, he answered, "I don't."

"Do you have any plans to go out again?"

"No, just desk work."

Fujiwara leaned back in his chair, set his elbows on the desk and laced the tips of his finger together. "As long as you're not going out again, I'll overlook it for today. I have noticed on previous occasions that you don't seem to be very attentive to your attire. The day before yesterday, your slacks were dirty. At a company that concerns itself with beauty, employees must take care of their personal appearance. If it comes to your attention that your suits are easily soiled, then I recommend you keep another set of clothes here. What do you imagine your generously large personal locker is for? Not for storing extra office supplies."

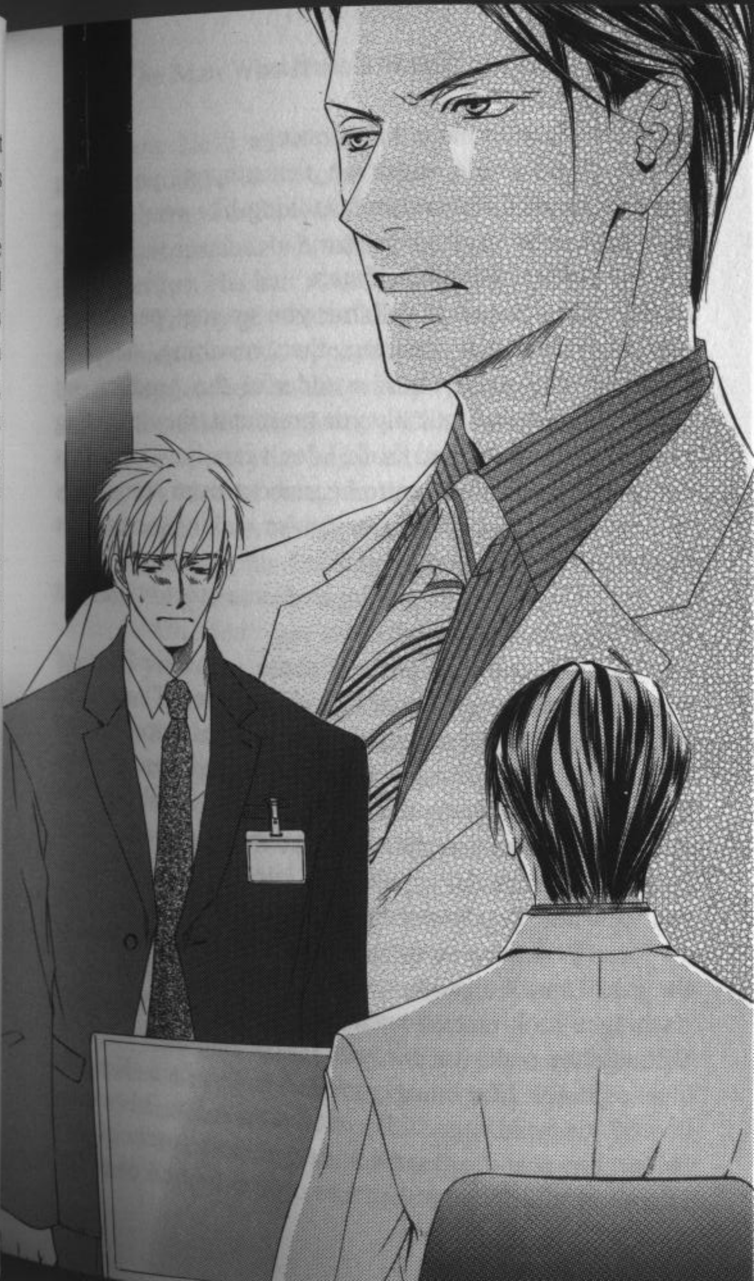
As if making an example of him, Fujiwara spoke in a voice loud enough to forewarn everybody around them. Kaitani bent slightly forward, the awkwardness and embarrassment reddening his face. He'd been a member of the baseball team in high school and college, kept his hair cut as close as a Buddhist priest's, and spent every day in jeans and a T-shirt. He was worlds away from being "fashion conscious," and had never touched anything that could be called a "cosmetic."

He'd immersed himself in extracurricular activities and kept putting off the job hunt until later. When his friends starting talking about getting offers from different companies, he realized he'd been procrastinating for too long. An engineering firm he thought looked promising turned out a total bust, and he couldn't stand the thought of graduating unemployed and leeching off his parents. On the eve of graduation, his uncle had pulled a few strings and found him an opening at Cavi, Inc.

Working in cosmetics had never occurred to him, and he wasn't sure he was up for the work, but there was no sense looking a gift horse in the mouth. He'd intended to give the job his best effort. Nevertheless, he hadn't thought to pay close attention to anything as trivial as some goop stuck to his suit.

"Keep your eyes open after this."

Kaitani's head bobbed up and down, even as he was seized with the urge to set fire to the soft, expensive



suit the man before him was wearing.

"And while we're on the subject, you often arrive at work with your hair looking like you've slept on it."

Kaitani felt himself start.

"You mean to tell me you've met people on company business wearing that revolting, slept-in hairstyle? No matter how wonderful the product, no matter how enthusiastically you present it, they're going to look at your head and think, I don't care how great this company is, I don't want to hear about from somebody with a head of hair like him. You're making a negative impression right from the start."

"I'm sorry," he apologized, in a quiet voice that almost vanished into a whisper.

"You don't seem sufficiently conscientious of yourself as an employee of Cavi Cosmetics. There's no need to dress to the nines, but you certainly don't want to leave people with a bad taste in their mouths, so start paying more attention to how you dress and how you look. And lastly, in maintaining the minimum standards of employee morale, try not to be late."

"Yes, I understand. But it was raining—"

"Perhaps you're one of those men not up to the job?" said Fujiwara, cutting him off mid-sentence, flashing a look at him with upturned eyes. "Men like that, all they make are excuses."

It felt like being punched in the face. Kaitani bowed his head regretfully, and returned to his desk. He sat down and opened his day planner to check his afternoon schedule, but his eyes only skimmed over the

characters. He'd never be late again. Faced with that kind of a tongue-lashing, he'd get to the meeting even if he had to crawl on his hands and knees. He realized that he was unconsciously brushing the back of his head with his fingertips. His hair wasn't sticking up today.

"Finally got that talking-to, huh?" a voice asked softly from the desk opposite his. When he raised his head, Kuge looked at him with pitying eyes. "I've been wondering when the Section Chief was going to say something about your bed hair. I think it has a certain charm, it's kind-of cute, but the Section Chief does toe the line when it comes to personal appearance."

Pressing his hand against the back of his hair, Kaitani hung his head.

"Oh, don't get so down about it. You're a tall guy, so your hair tends to stand out. Just between you and me, and I'm talking about somebody who quit already, but we had this really untidy girl here. She'd wear stockings with runs in them. One day, the Section Chief got so mad he called her over to his desk and told her how ugly her stockings were and not to wear them anymore, and handed her a box of brand-new stockings. She turned bright red. You had to feel so sorry for her. Compared to that, a little scolding's not much, huh?"

That wasn't a "little scolding." More like being flayed alive. "Yeah, sure," he muttered.

"Section Chief Fujiwara is something of a narcissist. Still, he's not the type to hold a grudge, so if you at least make a modest effort you'll be okay."

"I understand," he said to Kuge, who was saying all this with the best of intentions. However, turning off his emotions wasn't so easy. He agonized for five minutes, then finally stood up and left the office and went to the lavatory.

The lavatories at Cavi were minimalistic and ultramodern, with a black and white color scheme. Visitors were astonished at the stylish touches. The mirror flowed around the sinks like the ocean. This was all born out of the convictions of the company president. "People who create beautiful things," she stated, "must place themselves in an environment that keeps them aware of the beauty around them."

However, as far as Kaitani was concerned, a toilet was a toilet. It may be beautiful, it may be stylish, but he didn't want to stay there very long. He stood in front of the flowing, streamlined mirror and checked the back of his head. His hair wasn't standing up. He turned slowly around and took a good look at himself. Aside from his damp trouser cuffs, and some okonomiyaki sauce on his sleeves, no other unsightliness caught his eye.

Paying close attention to his appearance, he strolled back and forth in front of the mirror like a male model. A nagging thought came to him: What the hell are you doing? He thought the cuffs of his suit were dirty, but they weren't. He thought he had "bed hair," but he didn't. And even if he did, he put in a good day's work and he didn't slack off. People who made such a big deal out of such petty things were just being petty themselves.

No, not "people." Fujiwara. Fujiwara was the small one, the self-absorbed human machine. More

than riding his subordinates over trivialities, the asshole should chill out a bit; maybe laugh at his messed-up hair, but at least let him say, "Hey, I'll take care of it."

Kaitani struck a fighting pose in front of the mirror. "You're going down, Fujiwara!" However, he couldn't imagine any real concrete strategy for opposing him. Then, perhaps because of pointlessly expending all this energy, he suddenly had to take a piss. He hurriedly stood in front of the urinal.

"Cavi, huh."

He was beginning to think this job did not agree with him. When he was in school, he toyed with the idea of going into engineering, but becoming an engineer hadn't ever been a firm goal. He just vaguely thought it might be a career worth pursuing. Now, though, he wasn't willing to go so far as quit a top-three cosmetics company like Cavi. He'd asked around, but even his uncle, who'd twisted a few arms on his behalf, couldn't do anything more for him.

The newly incorporated Cavi Cosmetics was a division of a textile company by the name of Kabira Textiles. Kabira was a long-standing firm, going back to the early 20th century. Kabira grew rapidly after the war, successively expanding operations, and was currently into pharmaceuticals, foodstuffs, apparel and publishing, as well as pushing into many other developing fields.

Fifteen years before, the cosmetics business was purchased from a division of Kitano Chemical Company. At the time, sales were in the tank. A massive reorganization was undertaken six years ago. Based on an exhaustive marketing effort, Lyric, a basic cosmetic line aimed at customers in their mid-teens to mid-twenties, became a resounding success.

Subsequently building on steady sales, Cavi rolled out a well-received herbal supplement and cosmetics product called Chrysanthemum Pavilion. Focusing on marketing and sales strategies more than other companies, the handling of marketing data at Cavi put its Sales Promotion Department into a powerful position. Kaitani found all this out only after joining the company.

Women's cosmetics were Cavi's forte, and its chief executive was a woman. "Cosmetics for women, by women" was the corporate motto, and most of the employees were women. In the industry, it was known as the "Girl's Academy," a mostly female corporation.

They had recently begun hiring more men, but their numbers remained quite small. The word was there were far more male employees in specialty occupations such as R&D, but men accounted for no more that ten percent of the managers, section chiefs and department heads. There were three men in Sales Promotion, and one of them was overseas in Asia for training. That left Fujiwara and Kaitani.

Being the only two men there, like it or not, they should stay on good terms. Except that, besides the fact that Fujiwara was a superior and Kaitani was a subordinate, the gulf between them was wide and deep. Far from a matter of getting or not getting along, their lifestyles and values were so different as to leave them nothing to talk about.

For example, in the morning, Kaitani slept in until fifteen minutes before he had to leave for work at seven-thirty. When the alarm clock went off, he quickly washed his face, shaved, and combed his hair. He put on his suit, tied his tie, swallowed a couple bites of toast, and sprinted out of his apartment. The only time he looked in the mirror was the bare three minutes he spent shaving. If he slept in, he'd skip breakfast or skip combing his hair to make up for lost time. A bad hair day was definitely a day when he'd slept in.

Unlike the tightrope Kaitani tread every morning, Fujiwara's mornings were so refined that he might pause to listen for the chirping of songbirds.

When Kaitani first joined the company, he'd overheard Fujiwara talking to a female employee at a company mixer. Then as well, Fujiwara's languorous mood permeated his presence. He sat there with his chin poised in his palms, not breaking the pose as he spoke, the lingering base tones of his metronomic voice coiling around the listener like tendrils of smoke.

"No matter how late I stay out," he said, "I always wake up at six o'clock. After a quick shower, I brew an Espresso. Doing so may take a little time and effort, but I just can't begin the day without one."

Despite coming in on the conversation at the end, the overflowing aura of arrogance gave Kaitani the chills. Espresso or no Espresso, the day begins when you open your eyes, Kaitani retorted under his breath.

"My schedule is the same on my days-off, except I read in the afternoon or go to the gym. I don't take my work home. Weekends are for recuperation. It wouldn't make any sense if you still had to work."

He ended with big American shrug. His appearance bespoke an unwavering confidence, and his smile of overriding sense of superiority. Still smiling, Fujiwara whispered to the girl, "Come over to my place. We'll have some fun. I'll make you an Espresso."

The guy lived in a universe all his own. That moment confirmed it. After that, in drips and drabs, more information came to Kaitani's attention: Fujiwara's luxury brand watch was worth four million yen. His briefcase cost 700 thousand yen. His tailor-made suits set him back 300 thousand yen each. His shoes listed for 120 thousand yen, and he wouldn't wear a shirt that retailed for less than 50 thousand yen. Kaitani had to marvel at the guy's total net worth.

Fujiwara wasn't only fussy about his appearance. He was neat and tidy to a fault. His personal vocabulary was unsullied by words like "body odor" and "oily pores." Everything about his image was a production. Only haute couture was good enough for him to wear.

Kaitani could attempt such a life as well, but he didn't think he'd be cutting back on his sleep so he could take a shower and have an Espresso in the morning. He had no desire to become that kind of person, and wasn't about to.

The thunk of the door opening brought him back to reality. He glanced back over his shoulder just as he finished up, and his gonads practically climbed back into his groin from the shock.

Even while acknowledging his existence, Fujiwara pretended he wasn't there. He stood in front of the mirror over the sinks. He took a folding comb from

his pocket and carefully drew it through his perfectly kempt hair. After straightening his hair (which didn't need any straightening up), he brushed off his shoulders. After tucking the comb into his breast pocket, he took out a small case the size of his palm, extracted a small, thin square of paper, and blotted his forehead and cheeks, which showed no oil shine at all.

Kaitani couldn't make heads or tails of what he was seeing. He felt uncomfortable being there. He crossed the floor behind Fujiwara's back, and was just about to put his hand on the door when that sharp voice called out to him.

"Kaitani-kun."

"Y-Yes?"

There was anger in Fujiwara's voice. Now what? Kaitani thought as he wheeled around. Because he'd been in here for too long? So, now Fujiwara was keeping track of how long he spent in the toilet?

"Is this what you always do?"

The eyes looking back at him were cold as glacier water.

"No, I, uh, took a bit longer today than usual."

A look of disgust rose to Fujiwara's face, as if he'd just witnessed something filthy. "I wasn't asking about how long it takes you to use the facilities. I was asking you whether you washed your hands after doing so."

Kaitani unconsciously hid his hands behind his back. "Ah, I was going to wash my hands, but because you seemed to be using the sink, I thought I'd use the sink in the kitchen instead."

"The kitchen is not the place to wash your hands after using the toilet. The kitchen is the place to prepare food. Don't use the fact that I'm standing in front of the sink as an excuse. Simply mentioning that you needed to wash your hands would suffice. If you touch that doorknob with your dirty hands, who do you think will touch it next? I will. My hands will end up being contaminated by somebody unrelated to me—you. As an employee of this company, I must say that your manners are lacking in many respects. Such unhealthy habits and slovenly lifestyle choices reveal themselves in your appearance."

Kaitani stood rooted in front of the door as the words washed over him.

"Wash your hands after using the toilet. My God, it's embarrassing to have to lecture you like a kindergartner." Fujiwara let out a big sigh. "Go ahead," he said, stepping away from the mirror.

Kaitani went up to the sink and leaned forward, rounding his back. Cowed by that fixed stare on his back, he even used soap, which he never did, and scrubbed his hands thoroughly. After rinsing, he lightly shook his hands the way he usually did.

"Sorry," he squeaked in a small voice.

That severe voice rose again behind him. "Wait."

His back twitched. What next? he almost wept to himself.

"Where's your handkerchief?"

Kaitani hurriedly wiped the remaining dampness on his slacks. "I, uh, left it at home."

A lie. The truth was that he never carried one. He didn't want to bother with washing and drying handkerchiefs.

"Do you mean to tell me that whenever you go to the lavatory, you wipe your hands on your trousers?"

Kaitani couldn't dissemble his way out of this. He bowed his head and apologized. "I'm sorry."

Fujiwara practically gasped in amazement. He hadn't used the facilities, but he washed his hands, anyway. He slipped away from Kaitani's side and exited the lavatory, leaving him alone in the stylish bathroom.

Kaitani ground his teeth. Taking all that abuse and keeping his mouth shut was hell. In truth, the greater misery was letting it get to him like this. He hated the thought of going back to the office, so he crouched next to the wall for a good five minutes. But by staying, Fujiwara would still think he was playing hooky. Finally, he gave up and left. He entered the office, walking with his head down, trying to stay out of Fujiwara's field of view.

Even when Kaitani got to his desk, he had the depressing feeling he was being watched. He sent of an email to his counterpart in R&D about the next prototype conference, and one by one compiled the recently accumulated pile of questionnaires.

"Kaitani," came Kuge's voice opposite him.

"What?"

"I've got a rush job. Sorry, but could you help me out? I need to enter this data and create a spider chart."

Taking the materials from her, Fujiwara's desk again came into view. As aware of Fujiwara as he'd been, Kaitani hadn't noticed that he'd left. He instinctively asked, Kuge, "Where'd the Section Chief go?"

"Eh? Probably a meeting."

The number-one cause of stress in his life being gone was a great relief. He finished the job for Kuge in thirty minutes. She asked him to print out a copy and deliver it to Section Chief Shinohara in Sales. Tired of sitting in the same place for so long, he sprang to his feet.

On his way back from delivering the printout, he feigned a few practice throws with his left arm in the wide, empty hallway. He'd been a catcher in high school and college. He hadn't touched a baseball since graduation. He didn't have the talent to go pro, but he was good at baseball, and it'd been fun. Live game broadcasts would be starting about now, and he wouldn't miss a single one. College was barely two years behind him, but it seemed like ancient history to him now and he really missed it.

Thinking of heading off to the batting cages for the first time in a long time, he set up for the pitch, reared back, and threw a screamer across the knees. At the same, his eyes met those of the man coming around the corner. The man who carried on his person a net worth of approximately five million yen. With a sniff of laughter, the man disappeared into the elevator.

Out! The umpire's voice clanged inside his skull. Kaitani hung his head and trudged back to the office. He could well imagine the scene as the snob's sarcastic tone of voice queried him, What were you doing in the hallway? Not your job.

"The Section Chief will be back right after his current appointment," Kuge said as soon as he sat down.

"What's that?"

"You asked where he was a few minute ago, didn't you? You had an errand to run, right? He was looking for you, too. He stopped by and asked me where you were. I told him I sent you over the Sales. He wanted me to give you this."

Kuge handed him a light blue envelope, embossed with the name of the company. The envelope didn't weigh much, and was a size smaller than standard A4 paper. Wondering what in the world it contained, Kaitani nervously peeked inside.

And was stunned at what he saw there.

The batter swings on three and makes the final out. A perfect shutout.

That's what Kaitani felt like at that moment.

Chapter 2

Higashiyama was amused when Kaitani told him about it. His shoulders shook with laughter. Kaitani slammed his beer glass down on the counter with a thump. "This isn't something to laugh about," he pouted.

In the mood he was in, Kaitani hadn't wanted to head back to his apartment straight after work, so he emailed Higashiyama and mentioned that if he was wrapping things up on his end, perhaps they could head out and get something to eat? There was a great tavern not far from the train station called "Kemuri." They'd decided to meet up there.

Kemuri had been a coffee lounge in a previous incarnation, but the proprietress found running a coffee house a pain, and so, without changing the interior decor at all, she turned the place into a tavern. The walls were finished in antique brick, and a glowing chandelier hung from the ceiling. Sample side dishes were displayed in the glass cases that once held cakes and pastries. The personality of the proprietress, who, aside from the cuisine, couldn't stick to any single plan of action, was obvious everywhere. However, her sashimi and tempura were delicious, so she had a lot of customers.

They sat down on the counter stools, each draped with handmade woolen seat covers made by the jack-of-all-trades proprietress, and Kaitani tearfully protested all

of the stripes Fujiwara had laid across his back. Last but not least were the contents of the envelope.

Higashiyama shrugged. "Yeah, but when you think about it, it's a nice gesture, isn't it? He didn't think you had one, so he bought one for you."

Kaitani swung his flushed face back and forth. "I have a handkerchief. When I was job-hunting, I bought a suit and a six-piece handkerchief set came with it. No idea where it is now. But the whole thing stinks, no matter how you look at it." He slapped the envelope down on the counter. Inside were five handkerchiefs. "So he gives me some handkerchiefs as a present. There being five, I guess that means one for each day of the week."

While he complained, Higashiyama took one out of the handkerchiefs. "Hey," he said, in admiration. "Pretty good quality."

"They're all yours. I sure don't want them."

Higashiyama put the handkerchiefs back in the envelope. "Whatever," he said under his breath, folding his arms. "Look, whether you use them or not, you'd better at least thank him. Apitto handkerchiefs go for thirty bucks apiece."

Kaitani quickly grabbed the envelope. The handkerchiefs were in the plain sort of colors you'd expect a senior citizen to carry around with him. "Thirty bucks for one of these?"

"Apitto is an old and established foreign brand of fabrics, famous for its cotton blends. As you would expect, Fujiwara has an eye for quality, and giving you five is pretty generous."

Hearing the price made Kaitani nervous. Those three thousand yen handkerchiefs cried out to him, a chorus singing in Section Chief Fujiwara's voice, Wash your hands. Wash your hands. Wash your hands.

He didn't want them, didn't want to carry them, but was too cowed to throw them away. In the end, he stuck the envelope in his satchel. "Just thinking outloud," Kaitani muttered, sipping at his third beer. "But I don't think I'm ever going to get along with Section Chief Fujiwara. He's a completely different make and model. Naw, he's a completely different species."

"Species, huh?" said Higashiyama.

"Trying to work with somebody who's got a totally different set of values is a lost cause. The only person who's going to agree with Fujiwara is another snob like him, what with the 300 thousand yen tailormade suits and the smelly cologne." He gulped down the last of the remaining beer and let out a sigh.

"On the other hand," Higashiyama said, "who doesn't like hanging out with a friend who shares your same outlook on life? However, when it comes to your job, as a rule, I don't think that's the case. People with different perspectives working together produce more interesting results. That kind of experience gives you insights into how other people think. Understanding all the facets of another person is an essential part of your own growth."

Kaitani gripped the empty beer mug in both hands and stared at the bottom of the glass. "At least you're an adult. I haven't quite arrived yet."

Higashiyama lightly thumped him on the

shoulders. "That's not true. At my last company, I had a manager I couldn't stand. Working there made me sick to my stomach. The weird thing was, when I started thinking the job was all bullshit, that's what it became true. So, I told myself, 'This is interesting, this is interesting.' Sort of like self-hypnosis. The same thing applies to people. If you only think how much you hate somebody's guts, all you can do is tread water. Even if it's a lie at first, tell yourself something like, 'Everything this guy says pisses me off, but he really is decent.' Do that, and you really will come around to seeing him that way. Men or women, when you warm up to them and understand them, it's hard to go on hating them."

"You're definitely an optimist. In all honesty, I don't even like the way Fujiwara smells. More than anything else, any man wearing cologne like that is enough to make gag."

"Man, you're in a bad place!"

"You try being scolded about washing your hands in the toilet sometime. That'll dent any man's ego."

He bitched and moaned about Fujiwara, and it was past ten by the time he had cleared his head and said his fill. A bit tipsy, Kaitani left the establishment with Higashiyama.

The rain that had been falling when they left work had stopped as well. On the empty street, Kaitani cocked back the vinyl umbrella, imagined the white ball firing through the strike zone, and let loose a huge swing.

"Ah, great hit. I just imagine that ball is Fujiwara and want to knock it out of the park. You want to go to the batting cages, Higashiyama?”

Higashiyama grabbed the sleeve of his jacket and smiled wryly. “No, I’m okay. As drunk as you are, all you’d be doing is fanning the air.”

“Yeah, piss on that.” But imagining smashing a baseball decorated with Fujiwara’s face cheered him up. He looked up at the dark sky and laughed.

“Kaitani, let’s go this way to the station.” Higashiyama indicated the path alongside the park.

“Huh? Wazzat? You wanna go to the station, this way’s shortest. C’mon.”

Kaitani started down the main boulevard in the opposite direction. After several steps, he understood why Higashiyama wanted to take the detour along the park. At the intersection ahead, there among the people waiting there for the light to change was the same man he’d been trashing until a few minutes ago.

Fujiwara whispered in the ear of the woman he was with, and then turned. Higashiyama casually greeted him and Fujiwara nodded in return. Then Fujiwara and the woman mingled in with the crowds and disappeared down the darkened street.

“Hey, what’s with you?”

Until Higashiyama called out to him, Kaitani had been staring at Fujiwara and the woman. “Nothing. What a lousy coincidence.”

The woman with Fujiwara was Sasaguri, from reception. Among the receptionists, Sasaguri was known both in an outside the company for her good looks, pleasing voice, and especially her graceful countenance.

If Kaitani got himself a girlfriend, a woman like her would be ideal. However, he doubted that somebody as pretty as Sasaguri would date somebody like him. Saying ‘Hello’ to her in the morning and ‘Goodbye’ at night was the best he could do. He hadn’t been able to bring himself to ask her out.

“That was the receptionist from our company,” Higashiyama muttered.

“If she’s dating him, then she’s got bad taste in men,” Kaitani spat.

He liked her, but not enough to tell her. He tottered toward the station. His chest hurt. Yet she would go out with somebody like Fujiwara, that’s what it came down to.

Higashiyama lived in the opposite direction from him, and took the train going in the other direction as well. Descending the stairs to the platform, Higashiyama broke the silence, saying, “You don’t have a thing for her, do you?”

Sharp guy, that Higashiyama. Kaitani answered with forced laughter, “Yeah, I thought she was nice. But a girl like that is way out of my league.”

The sound of the train approached.

“Sorry for being such a wet blanket,” Kaitani said, as the train glided up to the platform. “And dumping all my problems on you.” He nodded his head in a quick bow and jumped onto the train.

“See you,” exclaimed Higashiyama as the train doors closed.

There weren’t many people in the car. Kaitani sat down in an empty seat and sighed. Turning the events of that afternoon over in his head, he just got more depressed. What a horrible day. Any day that got him tied up with Fujiwara was going to be a horrible day.

Chapter 3

The final Monday in June, Kaitani met with the designer commissioned to do the artwork for the KASHA line. Section Chief Fujiwara was supposed to handle the discussions, but other business came up at the last minute and he couldn't get away. And so, the order came down for Kaitani to pick up the design drafts.

There were a series of private, multipurpose booths in the east wing of the third floor of the corporate headquarters. Reception had been advised in advance to escort the designer to an open booth. As arranged, promptly at two o'clock, Kaitani got the call from Sasaguri saying that he'd arrived. Her sweet, bell-like voice stabbed him in the heart.

He put aside the task he was working on and walked down to the third floor. The designer was in the fifth booth. The young man sat in a chair with thin legs and an oval back. Their eyes met.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Kaitani from Sales Promotion. Mr. Fujiwara is tied up with other business and can't make it. He asked me to take his place."

Having introduced himself and presented his business card, Kaitani bowed. Even though he was an associate of Fujiwara, this was the first time Kaitani had met with the designer. In accordance with Fujiwara's wishes, the job hadn't been given to a design firm, but to an independent studio.

“Anna Kaitani?”

Kaitani was surprised to hear the correct pronunciation of his first name. Inside the company, he went by “Yasukazu,” the masculine reading of the kanji in his name. Not many knew the proper reading was “Anna.”

The designer had a soul patch on his chin, and wore a hat appropriate to an artiste. His clothes, rough and worn but not too shabby, only made him look all the more “creative.” He flashed a friendly smile, and all at once Kaitani remembered. “Hey, Shiozawa, isn’t it? The name on the designs is JUNICHI, so—”

“That’s my pseudonym. Wow, strange meeting you here. We haven’t crossed paths since high school.”

In high school, he and Yukihiko Shiozawa were on the baseball team together. All the members on the team had committed themselves to the goal of attending the annual Koshien high school national baseball championships, but were crippled by a lack of talent. They instead achieved the spectacular accomplishment of getting knocked out in the first qualifying round two years running, thanks to Shiozawa’s spectacularly bad pitching. After high school, Shiozawa had gone to art college and Kaitani to university, so they naturally grew apart.

Finding himself together with an old baseball buddy, with whom he’d shared the same mud and sweat and toil, the tension in the room evaporated.

“I can’t believe you became a designer. Frankly, I didn’t know you had that kind of talent.”

“You forget that I was also in the high school art club?”

Kaitani recalled something to that effect, but as he hadn’t an iota of interest in art, so he’d forgotten all about it. Now that he’d mentioned it, Shiozawa had done a top-notch job painting the refreshment stand signs for the high school culture festival. Kaitani remembered being impressed at the work he’d done.

“A surprise for me, too. I never would have expected that you’d end up in sales at a cosmetics company.”

“No less than myself.” He said in a quiet voice, “Just between you and me, I got this job thanks to my uncle’s connections. I was late to the job hunt and everything was up in the air.”

“Really?” said Shiozawa with a straight face. “Nothing wrong with having connections. The important thing is the effort you put into your job. But working for a big company would be nice. My studio consists of the boss and a staff of two in a tiny office. At best, we’re scraping by. This contract with Cavi was a stroke of luck for us. We won’t be going under now.”

He rested his arms on the table and wrung his hands. When he was a lousy pitcher in high school, he did the same thing, telling himself, “Let’s go!” as he headed to the mound.

“This design is the best work we’ve done,” he said, bowing his head. “We hope you like it.”

Kaitani found the situation honestly discomfiting. “C’mon, knock it off. We’re buddies.”

“I suppose,” said Shiozawa with a small smile. He took out a file folder. “This time, all ten items employ a single motif. The image KASHA suggested to us was one of peace and harmony, a sense of the Oriental. Expanding upon that in several directions, this is what we came up with."

As soon as Kaitani opened up the file folder, he said to himself, "Cool." The base color of the bottles was silver. On top of that was layered the green-tinged black design of a dragon.

"A dragon carried about it a hint of evil. I think that's why men like dragons. Deep inside, we really want to be bad. The designs of men's cosmetics up until now have mostly tried to split the difference with simple artwork that the vast majority of men aren't going to love and aren't going to hate. We think it's time for a design that makes this kind of bold impression. It's a design that will make an impact while not going out of style."

"Yeah, yeah," said Kaitani, agreeing with him heartily.

"You probably don't get it from the picture here, but these parts of the dragon are embossed, and will feel slightly rough to the touch. We think it lends a higher-class feel than the typical silk screen. The design goes on the lid as well. It looks like the coil of the dragon's tail."

Kaitani imagined the company's products with this dragon design occupying a corner of a convenience store. Such a retail display would look quite cool. "These are great. These are really, really great."

"You think so?" Shiozawa planted both elbows on the table and leaned forward. "The best aspect to this design is that it's classy from beginning to end.

Depending on the person, this kind of bottled product may last for two or three months, half a year if we're talking about inconsistent use. The container will sit in the bathroom the whole time. It'll get worn and dirty. With a more simple design, the deterioration would really stand out. With this design, when the bottle gets grungy, the effect is quite the opposite. Its essence comes out. And when you're finished with a bottle, it's so nice-looking you'd think you'd think twice about throwing it away."

When they were in high school, Kaitani could tell what Shiozawa was thinking from the way he stood on the mound. The same way he'd signal the next pitch, Kaitani said the next thing that came into his head: "And so next time you'll want to buy the same product."

"That's right!"

The mutual feeling was no different from when they had stolen three strikes from a veteran batter. Kaitani abruptly stuck out his right hand and they firmly shook hands. "We'll go with this," he declared.

Shiozawa grinned and scratched at the back of his head. "That's good news on my end, but I hear your Section Chief is a pretty tough nut."

"Even if Fujiwara gives these designs the thumbs-down, I'm going to push hard for them. In any case, when he sees them, he's guaranteed to sign-off on them."

After that, they put business aside and talked about high school. They could reminisce forever and not run out of things to say; they went on talking for almost an hour.

When the time came to leave, as they left the multipurpose booths, Kaitani gave Shiozawa one warning. "It's not a problem when we're together, but don't call me Anna at the company. I go by Yasukazu."

"Sure," Shiozawa said. "But what's wrong with Anna? Sounds fine to me."

"The name sucks. Anna's a girl's name, right?"

"Okay, I'll be careful, Anna," Shiozawa said, putting particular emphasis on the name.

"Hey," said Kaitani, with a menacing look.

"Joke, joke," Shiozawa laughed as they parted.

Kaitani's first name, as registered on his birth certificate, was pronounced "Anna." After two sons, his father's fervent wish was that his last child be a girl, and so had considered only girl's names. His last child turned out to be a boy. Having become attached to the name "Anna," he couldn't give it up. The kanji for Anna originally consisted of An ("contentment") + na (first character from the ancient city of Nara). As pathetic as his mother thought the name was, she only protested the "look" of the name, and so she changed the second kanji to the character for "harmonious."

Kaitani couldn't stand the name that his father made such a fuss over. In elementary school, he was teased as "Annie-boy." When he entered middle school, he decided on his own to call himself "Yasukazu," a rarer, but accepted reading of the same kanji. The name soon became common parlance, but close friends and kids he knew from elementary school continued to call him "Anna."

After getting back to the office, Kaitani again

examined the proofs Shiozawa had given him. No two ways about it; the designs were great. They really hit home. Kaitani was still marveling at what a good job Shiozawa had done when Section Chief Fujiwara returned from his appointment. The emergency meeting apparently was over.

After the hand washing incident in the bathroom, and seeing him with Sasaguri, Kaitani's dislike for the man had only intensified. Truth was, he didn't want to talk to Fujiwara, but today, Kaitani really wanted to show him Shiozawa's designs. He approached Fujiwara's desk, file in-hand.

Top notch, he imagined an impressed Fujiwara saying, to which he would nonchalantly boast, Yeah, Junichi, the designer, he's an old classmate of mine.

"These are the Kasha designs from Studio 7½."

"Ah," muttered Fujiwara, taking the file and placing it on the corner of his desk.

He stared at the computer screen, and showed no signs of getting to the file anytime soon. Kaitani gave up and returned to his desk. After working on mail surveys and basic data entry tasks for an hour, Kaitani got up from his desk to go outside for a bit.

"Kaitani-kun," Fujiwara called out to him, almost as if he had been waiting for him to stand up.

Must be about the designs, Kaitani figured, going up to the Section Chief's desk.

"You going out?" Fujiwara asked, handing him the file.

"Yes."

"You'll be going by Nishino, right? On your way, drop this off at Studio 7½. Tell them I'll email the details."

"Return all of them? Without making any copies?"

Fujiwara narrowed his eyes as if annoyed. "I don't need copies. Those designs are unacceptable."

Kaitani almost dropped the file. "By unacceptable, you mean—"

"I mean I'm rejecting them. Studio 7½ will have to submit new designs."

Kaitani nervously waded into the discussion. "Um . . . I think the designs are fine. What exactly about them don't you like?"

Fujiwara rested his chin in his right hand and glanced up at Kaitani. "You looked at them?"

"I had a look at them downstairs. The dragon design struck me as very original."

Fujiwara heaved a little sigh and leaned forward. "You're starting your third year here. From all the marketing data you've handled in your position, you can't understand what's wrong here?"

The words were like a dagger through the heart.

"Applying a little common sense, you should be able to predict that decorative art like this would not have popular appeal. We cannot use designs that are going to prejudice the consumer one way or the other. Simplicity is the most important factor in the design of men's cosmetics. Any playful aspects should be confined to the logo." Fujiwara shrugged. "If I had been dealing with this designer directly, I would have returned them

immediately."

The words jabbed at Kaitani from the left and from the right, leaving him lightheaded and his skull ringing. He ground his teeth. Fujiwara said the designs wouldn't be popular, but he thought they were cool. He wasn't just a Cavi employee; he was also a twenty-five year old man, KASHA's target demographic.

"If you're talking about simplicity, how is it any different from the current CHAPS line? You say you want to distinguish KASHA from the products of other companies. That being the case, then doesn't its design, too, need to be unique?"

He'd told Shiozawa, We'll go with this. And if Fujiwara gave the designs a thumbs down, He'd push back hard. More than anything else, he honestly believed that what he'd seen with his own two eyes were quality designs.

Fujiwara slowly spelled it out for him, word-by-word. "No matter how unique the design, no matter how excellent the artwork, if the design doesn't sell the product, then its usefulness ends with the designer ego. And worse, it will inflict considerable damage on the company."

"But, don't you think it probably will sell?"

"I've told you already. This design is not acceptable."

"I can't agree with that," Kaitani stubbornly insisted. "This dragon design won't go out of fashion. No matter how old men get, they don't lose that desire to flirt with their bad side. If in only a little way, this bottle satisfies that urge with a touch of evil in an Oriental context."

He was only repeating what Shiozawa had told him, but the argument emerged in his own words. Fujiwara sunk into silence with a displeased expression on his face, deep lines appearing between his eyebrows.

"I want to go forward with this design. I'll accept the consequences."

After shaking his head back and further like an exasperated mother dealing with an unreasonable child, Section Chief Fujiwara slowly opened his mouth. "I hear what you're saying, but your belief that this design is good and will sell is just that, a hunch."

"Yes, it is," Kaitani answered, with an unwavering show of confidence.

"And what is the foundation for your faith in this hunch of yours?"

There was no way to answer such a difficult question, so he couldn't reply. What was the basis for his convictions? In the first place, a hunch, by definition, didn't have a foundation.

"Up until now, you haven't taken command, become a leader and managed a project. You've only acted in a support capacity. Though we worked on CHRYSANTHEMUM PAVILION together, I never heard an opinion from you regarding sales-related ideas or data."

Kaitani couldn't argue with that. Up until this point, his attitude toward his job had been mostly passive. His overriding feeling was that somebody like him, who hardly knew a thing, didn't have anything important to say.

"I could understand this reaction if you were a rookie, but this is the third year you've been assigned to

this department. What have you learned about the way we do things here? You say you have some kind of blind faith in this dragon design, but how many of KASHA's target customers share your opinion? How many think the dragon gives off this 'bad vibe' you talk about? Can you produce any survey results to that effect?"

Kaitani lowered his head and bit his tongue. He'd only see the design two hours ago. There was no way he was going to circulate a survey and get back results in that length of time. Fujiwara damn-well knew that, too.

"I'm waiting for your answer."

"I haven't done any surveys."

Fujiwara laughed thinly, a triumphant look on his face. "What you mean is, the only evidence you can supply for believing this dragon design will be widely popular—that it's got this so-called bad boy image—is your own personal opinion."

That is what it came down to, but Kaitani couldn't bring himself to admit it.

"You've got no data, nothing to back up your claims. How are we supposed to trust the hunch of a rank amateur like you?"

Kaitani clenched his back teeth and wrung his hands together. Fujiwara's questioning was unbearable, mortifying, frustrating almost to the point of tears. He thought the dragon design was a solid one. But there was nothing wrong with Fujiwara's argument. That's what made it so awful; he didn't have the information he needed to fight back.

"You say you want to go forward with this design, but if it fails, if the design doesn't sell, the company will incur significant losses. In that case, how will you rectify the situation? Glibly saying you'll take responsibility won't cut it."

The phone on Fujiwara's desk rang. "This design is not acceptable. The next design proposals should be ready in ten days time. Inform Studio 7½ that, based on their next submission, we will not rule out going with a different firm."

He said this all quickly and then picked up the phone. He didn't spare Kaitani another glance. With a token bow to excuse himself, Kaitani returned to his desk.

When he said down, Kuge said, "What were you and the big boss talking about? You two were at it for a long time."

"Nothing," he replied. "Just stuff about the new product designs."

Kaitani shoved the file into his satchel and trudged out of the office.

Following the map printed on the back of Shiozawa's business card, he headed straight to the studio where Shiozawa worked. Having to tell Shiozawa that the design was unacceptable after he'd all but guaranteed it would be approved was incredibly harsh. However, if he didn't tell them to fix it, and, like Fujiwara said, and create a neutral design that nobody hated or loved, Shiozawa would lose the contract with Cavi that this small shop was betting its future on.

Shiozawa's office was not far away; just three stops from the station closest to Cavi headquarters.

When Kaitani got off the train and left the station, rain was falling. The downpour followed him like a harbinger of doom, from one misfortune to the next, darkening his already dark mood.

He and Shiozawa had exchanged cell phone numbers and email addresses. Kaitani didn't have the courage to contact him beforehand. If Shiozawa wasn't at work, he could take care of things without having to look him in the eye.

Unfortunately, the person who met him in the reception area was Shiozawa himself.

Studio 7½ was located on the third floor of multiuse building that housed a variety of businesses. Shelves covered the entire left-hand side of the twelve by twelve foot office. Books, magazines, and file folders spilled off the shelves, collecting in disordered piles on the floor. Despite the air of creativity generated by the man who made all this, Kaitani realized that this job required a lot of hands-on work. Shiozawa showed him to a kind of lobby demarcated by partitions set up in the corner of the office.

"Like I said, the designs are really great," he said, as Shiozawa pulled out an uncomfortable looking chair for him.

"Thanks for bringing by the file. Sorry for all the trouble. If you would've let me know, I could have picked it up myself. So, how did it go on your end? You liked them, and my boss said it was top-notch work—"

Shiozawa smiled broadly. Without meaning to, Kaitani averted his eyes. "Yes, there is that." He started to say, the painful words coming out haltingly. To no effect, he clasped his hands in his lap. He couldn't find the words, started over again, and still had nothing to say. He bowed his head, and the silence continued.

"You mean it turned out badly?" his friend asked nervously. Kaitani raised his head. "It did, didn't it?"

Kaitani couldn't answer. In answer to the question, he nodded his head forcefully.

"I see." The smile vanished from Shiozawa's face. He cast his eyes downwards in disappointment.

"Hey, I thought these dragon designs were great. But he rejected them because he said they wouldn't be widely popular."

The energy drained out of him. Shiozawa patted him on the shoulders and smiled bitterly. "Don't worry about me. I get where your Section Chief is coming from. We're always doing designs over. I was pretty confident about things this time around, so it's something of a disappointment." Shiozawa scratched at the back of his head. "So, we'll have to do them over. Have you settled on a delivery date?"

"Um, ten days. Fujiwara said to tell you he'd be emailing the details."

"I understand."

He'd enjoyed meeting a friend after all this time and learning that they'd be working together, but he hadn't imagined it would have ended up like this.

"When the new designs are ready, I'll bring them by." Shiozawa grinned, an expression completely at-odds with what he must have been feeling. "It's my fault the design was rejected, so don't worry about it."

Shiozawa's concern for him almost brought him to tears. Leaving Studio 7½, Kaitani trudged to the nearest station, his shoulders drooping in disappointment. It was still raining, with shallow puddles forming here and there. He didn't bother walking around them. The cuffs of his slacks got heavier and heavier and they soaked up the water.

The rejected dragon designs were the only thing on his mind. When he tried to think about something else, the thin smile creasing Fujiwara's mouth and the look of dejection on Shiozawa's face haunted his thoughts over and over.

Whether it sold or didn't sell, those were quality designs. The Section Chief said they were no good, but he couldn't agree. When Fujiwara said they were "Unacceptable," he hadn't only said, "Oh?" and withdrawn.

He heard the sound of nearing thunder, and a flash of lightening lit up the gray sky. In the distance, faint shrieks of dismay mingled with the pounding of the rain. Everybody around him started running. Kaitani looked up blankly at the glowing heavens. The suddenly-cruel sky seemed to scolding him for pretending that everything was okay, when he didn't know how things were going to turn out.

This failure wasn't his fault. He'd fought back with his best, and it'd all be for naught. The thought suddenly flashed across his mind: Did I really do all I could? Make or break? Do or die?

The flashes of lightening racing across the sky lit up his face. "Doing all he could" had merely involved standing up to Fujiwara and complaining to him. Were there really no other options open to him?

The white sheets of rain poured down, obscuring the sidewalk on the other side of the street. Kaitani stared at the storm. A full ten minutes later, gripping the umbrella tightly in his right hand, he turned on his heels and, with great spirit, raced back through the downpour, not to the station, but to Studio 7½, Shiozawa's office.

Chapter 4

After the morning marketing meeting, Kaitani couldn't stop himself from yawning. It was enough that Osada, sitting next to him, whispered, "At least cover your mouth.

He nodded, and even clamping his jaw shut, he did it again. God, he was tired. Even when he stood up, his bones ached.

He raised his head and his eyes met with those of Fujiwara, standing next to the office manager. Fujiwara seemed somehow pissed-off at him. Still, Kaitani shook off the hard look without a second thought, because there was a work-appropriate reason for his sleepiness and fatigue.

After the ten-minute meeting was over, everybody returned to their respective tasks. Kaitani headed straight to Fujiwara's desk.

"Section Chief Fujiwara, I would like to have a few minutes of your time."

Facing his compute monitor, Fujiwara only flicked his gaze at Kaitani. "What's this about?"

"There is something I would like you to consider, if you would, please."

Fujiwara glanced at his watch. "I'll give you ten minutes," he muttered.

"This has to do with the dragon motif in the design proposals previously submitted by Studio 7½ for the KASHA line."

Fujiwara knit his brows together. "I thought I told you it was unacceptable."

Kaitani held out to Fujiwara the file folder in his right hand. "I conducted a survey about the dragon design and have tabulated the results. I'd like you to look at what we came up with."

He thrust the folder out to Fujiwara, who showed no signs of taking it. Kaitani placed the folder on the desk. "I got help from some friends in high school and college. We amassed almost 800 survey responses and compiled the data."

Fujiwara didn't react at all, only sat there with a cold look on his face. Kaitani quelled the impatience growing in his gut, and began his explanation.

"First are the impressions associated with the dragon motif. The responses differ according to age groups. Teens to mid-twenties overwhelmingly describe it using terms such as 'good-looking' or 'cool.' From the mid-twenties on up, the results point to more of a 'bad boy' or 'outsider' image."

Fujiwara finally opened the first page of the report.

"We collected responses on a variety of other data points, as well. We asked if respondents would be interested in trying out a men's cosmetic with a dragon design on the container. More that 90 percent answered in the affirmative."

Bit by bit, his confidence grew. Kaitani produced the last item from his suit coat pocket. "I had an acquaintance of mine create a sample of the dragon

design on this lotion bottle. It's a half-scale model."

Fujiwara eyed this as well, the surprise showing. The steel container had a tinged silver finish. Toward the bottom of the container, the dragon turned into a pattern than ran around the circumference the can. The dragon elements were layered on the steel finish with green ink, making it rough to the touch. The lid was not the customary screw-off top, but instead could be removed with one hand. There was a trick to the lid as well. Pressing down or pulling up where the dragon's tail curled onto the cap opened the bottle.

Holding the bottle in his hand, his face grim as usual, Fujiwara didn't have a thing to say.

"Section Chief, about the planning meeting next week—" Kuge came up behind Kaitani. Fujiwara raised his head. Kuge said, "May I give you my staffing schedules now?"

"Ah, just put it on my desk."

Kuge placed the documents on the desk, taking the opportunity to glance at what was in Fujiwara's hand. "Section Chief, is that a bottle for the new product line?"

Instead of answering her, Fujiwara instead asked, "What do you think of this design?"

He handed her the half-scale mock-up. Kuge took it, confirmed the look and feel for herself, opened and closed the lid repeatedly. "This is pretty good. It's so cute."

This unexpected response nearly made Kaitani's knees buckle. "It's not cute," he protested. "It's cool."

"Of course, of course," Kuge apologized, and shrugged her shoulders. "I love this dragon motif. Making the lid part of the dragon's tail is a nice touch. It's pretty elaborate for a cosmetic, but if I saw one in a guy's room, I'd just want to pick it up."

So, the design made a good impression on women, too. Great, Kaitani thought, rubbing his hands together. Five days before, on the rainy afternoon, he'd made a resolution: he would do whatever he could, not with words, but with actions. He'd use everything in his arsenal. He told himself that resistance was not futile, and that come hell or high water, he wouldn't let up until he'd achieved his goal.

The first thing he'd done was race back to Shiozawa's office and suggest that they stick to their guns and stay with the dragon design. Shiozawa was resigned to the fact that it'd already been rejected once, but as Kaitani argued with him, he came around to Kaitani's way of thinking. However, if they put all of their eggs in one basket and went down with an honorable but crushing defeat, Shiozawa's job would be on the line. While they pressed forward with the dragon motif, Shiozawa would prepare a new set of designs.

There was nothing concrete about what only resided on paper, so Shiozawa proposed that they create a scale mock-up. Even though he didn't have direct contacts with the people who could make such a model, he got in touch with some old friends from the design school he'd attended and was able to arrange it.

This was more than a matter of begging favors. Kaitani got down to work. So that he could present Fujiwara with sufficiently compelling evidence, he surveyed all of his friends and acquaintances from junior high, high school, and college. The data he collected would determine how well the dragon motif would be received. There was no slacking off. If it turned out badly, they had to give themselves time to switch over to the backup design. Kaitani gave himself five days to collect the surveys and analyze the data.

Compiling the faxes and emails that came back day after day, he didn't have time to sleep. His biggest break came from a high school classmate who'd become a high school teacher and gotten his students to fill out the survey. Getting direct responses from the younger generation created an important reference point.

"This is different, but pretty interesting, don't you think?"

He hadn't asked for it, but Kuge was backing him up. Resting his chin in his hand, Fujiwara turned through the report page by page. "I said in the first place that I didn't like this design proposal," he muttered, not looking at Kaitani.

"But it is well-received, according to these surveys. The data says it'll be a hit."

Fujiwara sighed, pressed his fingers against his temples. "The data suggests the possibility that the design may have a wider acceptance that I first imagined. The results speak for themselves. But do you think you can bring it to market?"

"Yes, I do," Kaitani answered, confidently.

Standing next to him, Kuge said under her breath, "Ah, yes, indeed. A container this elaborate would likely be pretty expensive. Kaitani, what's the unit cost for something like this?”

His mind went blank. The manufacturing cost of the container. That's right. It wasn't free. He'd been so consumed with the marketability of the dragon design that he hadn't given the cost structure any thought at all.

“I, um, haven't considered that, yet.”

Kuge continued, “Even if we approved the design, we can't use it if it's going to eat into our margins. You have to pay attention to things like that. This rising dragon motif by itself will incur substantial up-front expenses. What do you think is the best way to do the printing? If you can handle that while maintaining the same ambiance about it, the rest should be inexpensive enough.”

Oh God, Kaitani thought, as soon as he heard the word “printing.” This embossed feel would really hike up the price.

“Kaitani.”

Hearing his name, he came to attention. Fujiwara had a frown on his face. “I'll say it again. I don't want to spend a lot of time on something I've already rejected.”

Kaitani had run himself ragged for five days, and had been doomed from the start. It was like a punch to the solar plexus.

Fujiwara said, “I'm looking for a product design that will sell, too. Nevertheless, I'm not going off on unrewarding adventures, nor do I intend to take unnecessary risks. Aren't you still insisting on your own opinions without the doing necessary groundwork first?”

He was treating all of Kaitani's hard work and the results he submitted like garbage. It was mortifying enough to make him break down like a little kid. He bit his lip.

This past few days, he'd cut back his sleep to two hours a night. He was so ridiculously tired that it hurt. Yet, he'd enjoyed the work. As painful as it was, it seemed paradoxical to call it pleasurable, but that's the only way he could describe it.

Experiencing the feedback as he compiled the survey data, and seeing the positive responses for himself convinced him that he had a winner. This was the first time in the three years since he'd joined the company that he'd become totally immersed in his job.

Suddenly, he heard a loud thump! Kuge struck the desk with her right hand and leaned toward Fujiwara. “Section Chief,” she said, “I really think you're over the line on this one. Kaitani has gone the extra mile, hasn't he? Whatever the results, shouldn't you at least recognize the effort he's put in?”

Kuge had worked up a head of steam. In the face of such fury, Fujisawa looked a little bewildered. “It is the duty of an employee's superiors to discern the direction of a misdirected effort and steer it back on track.”

“Even when unsuccessful, hard work is hard work. Shouldn't it pave the way for what comes next? Shouldn't you be addressing these issues in a manner that looks ahead to the future?” Kuge was on a roll. “Now that we're on the subject, I'd like to get a few more things off my chest. I've had questions about your management style for some time. Your marketing-driven approach has yielded significant results. Its efficiency is high and its failure rate low. However, being dominated by numerical results not only makes it increasingly difficult to make decisions, but doesn't it also end up killing off new ideas?"

Fujiwara drew his brows together and scowled. He took a breath and said, "But—"

Cutting him off before he could continue, Kuge said, "I'm sorry, but if we can clear up the cost concerns, I think Kaitani's design will prove both superior and original. Since we've still got time, don't you think it'd be a good idea to at least make this proposal provisional?"

After a moment of silence, Fujiwara looked across the office. Every employee was observing this thrilling exchange between Kuge and the Section Chief. Amidst the stifling tension, Fujiwara cleared his throat and looked straight at Kuge. "Since you insist, we'll consider the dragon design proposal on a provisional basis."

Kuge turned and clapped Kaitani on the back. "Great, huh?"

"Y-Yes."

"The dragon design proposal is provisional. I think the cost factor will prove a major obstacle, but give it your best shot."

With a slap and a wink, Kuge returned to her desk. Kaitani glanced at Fujiwara. When their eyes met, Fujiwara pushed the survey material he'd submitted toward him. "These, I believe, belong to you."

"Um, you can keep them. I have my own copies."

"It's not necessary. I leave it to your safekeeping."

Fujiwara took his hand off the file folder. The proposal had survived. However, Kaitani still felt unsatisfied. Fujiwara hadn't said anything, but Kaitani understood. In front of everybody, including Kuge, he declared the dragon design "provisional." He hadn't guaranteed that it would eventually be chosen. Simply to smooth things over and placate Kuge, he'd said, "provisionally." And because Fujiwara didn't have any abiding interest in the design or anything Kaitani had done, he wasn't interested in keeping the report Kaitani had prepared.

Kaitani didn't think that hard work by itself would pay off. Back in high school, despite how hard the baseball team practiced, they were eliminated two years in a row in the first round of the national tournament. He couldn't forget that experience; there were some things you simply couldn't control. It'd been a mortifying lesson to learn in high school. Losing had been tough then, but now things had changed.

What made things different this time, Kaitani had to believe, was because he hadn't yet heard the umpire bellow, "Game over!"

Chapter 5

Apart from the dragon design, Shiozawa also created a simpler design logo; he got an "Okay" from Fujiwara on the first submission. While Shiozawa had escaped the worst-case scenario—losing the account with Cavi—the simple logo left Kaitani with the bland impression that he'd seen something like it a dozen times before. There was nothing fresh or new about it.

With the dragon design in contingency, Kaitani wasn't sure about how to proceed. No matter how clueless he might be, though, the last thing he was going to do was ask Fujiwara for help. If he did, Fujiwara would simply tell him he was in over his head, and dismiss his concerns without hesitation.

At any rate, calculating the unit cost of the bottle was first on the agenda. Kaitani spent every spare minute reading old reports and fishing for information. The long and short of it was simple: cosmetics containers were manufactured abroad, in Asia. In particular, there were a number of manufacturing facilities with low unit costs and high production volume. In the case of KASHA, the manufacturer was not yet decided. It was a tricky problem.

Compared to women's products, manufacturers of men's products were few and far between. And, because of high overseas shipping costs, domestic production might remain competitive.

Kaitani had another concern about offshore production, and that was whether an overseas facility could reproduce the fine details required in such a design. When he'd previously worked on a women's cosmetic line, there'd been no end to the troubles with the overseas plant and the containers. In Japan, a difference of one millimeter in size would be cause for concern, but overseas, it would be considered "in the ballpark." There were often inconsistencies in the finished product, as well.

Kaitani believed a domestic manufacturer would be best. Cavi's sheet steel products—hair mousse dispensers and antiperspirant spray cans—were made domestically at the company-operated Aoba factory in Shinagawa. His first thought was to go directly to the Aoba factory and consult with the engineers about how much the container would cost to make, but he was uncertain as to whether they would want to deal with a design that no responsible party had committed to.

That day, Kaitani stayed holed-up in the reference room until after business hours, dredging through old business documents. Although he found information about sheet steel manufacturing, because of the intricacy of this design, the information could only serve as a guide to the potential cost of the new containers. He definitely needed to consult with the engineers at the Aoba factory, but he was unsure about how to make the necessary call.

By the time he'd finished browsing through the available documentation, his eyes were red and sore. It was past ten o'clock when he returned the documents to the shelf. There wasn't a person left on the floor.

He notified the security guard, who let him out of the building. Although it wasn't raining, the heavy, humid air made him catch his breath. On his way to the station, he passed by a convenience store. A small Tanabata festival exhibit was on display in the front window. Come to think of it, it was July. Recently, he'd been working late so often that he was living on convenience store carryout. Since he always went to the same store, he'd tried every box lunch on the menu. He was now into his second week.

Even though buying something here meant more to carry home on the train, now and then he liked to sample the goods from different convenience stores. He strolled into the store. He was there to get some carryout, but he headed for the racks of men's cosmetics. A well-known brand from another company lined the shelves. Nothing was out of stock, and the display was conspicuously located in the most visible part of the store. Several Cavi products stood off to the side by themselves, but the lotions were out of stock, and the "fronting" of the rest was haphazard.

It struck him as a sorry sight. Under the guise of examining the merchandise, Kaitani straightened up the products. As he was doing so, a hand reached past him, picked up a can of the competitor's shaving cream, and went up to the register.

When KASHA went on sale, Kaitani promised himself that this shelf would be lined with dragons. He turned around and saw a woman standing by the magazine racks. His heart skipped a beat. She had a

slender physique, and her soft hair fell in waves on her shoulders. Her lips were glossy, her eyes large.

It was the receptionist at Cavi, Hiromi Sasaguri.

Sasaguri smiled and nodded to him. He awkwardly bowed in turn. And then, something entirely unexpected happened. She approached him. "Kaitani-san, are you going home right now?"

She sometimes greeted him when he passed by the reception area, but never by name. Despite there being few men at the company, their total numbers still came to almost sixty. Overjoyed that she remembered him from among them, he practically flew over to her.

"Yes, I am," he said. "I was stuck late doing some research."

"You sure are working hard. It looked to me like you were examining our company's product display."

Her praise made him suddenly self-conscious. Kaitani scratched the back of his head, surreptitiously checking to make sure his hair wasn't sticking up. After being cautioned by Fujiwara, even if he didn't take the time to eat breakfast, he made sure that his bed hair behaved itself.

"Um, are you going home now, too, Sasaguri-san?"

She casually brushed her hair back from her forehead and smiled. "No, I got off work at six. I went to the theater to see a movie."

There was a small cinema next to the station. It showed Japanese art house films father than blockbusters. Kaitani figured she must be a real film buff.

"You don't say. Was it interesting?"

Sasaguri flashed a wry smile. "It was okay," she said, meaning it wasn't that good.

"Do you like movies?"

It followed that if she went to art house theaters, she must be a buff. But her response wasn't what he expected. "Not particularly. Watching movies is a good way to turn my brain off for a while."

A shadow flitted across her pretty face and her countenance darkened. Something bad must have happened, he surmised, but he didn't have the courage to broach the subject.

In the short silence that followed, a thought suddenly occurred to him. No matter what they talked about, no matter how well they got along, Sasaguri and Fujiwara were still an item. She was Fujiwara's girl. Kaitani knew the odds were heavily against him.

He bit his lip painfully. At the same time, after being neglected for almost ten hours, his stomach growled. Worse, it was quite loud. He nervously looked up. Sasaguri looked at him with wide eyes and then giggled. In fact, she was laughing at him. A second later, he blushed from the tips of his ears to the soles of his feet.

"You must be hungry," she asked, smiling.

"Ah, yeah. I haven't eaten for a while."

"Hey, why don't we go get something to eat? I haven't had dinner yet, either. I'm starving."

He could have killed his unruly stomach, but right on the heels of his injured pride it had come to his rescue! "S-Sure. Let's go." He glanced at his watch.

The time was a little past ten-thirty. "You won't be inconvenienced, getting back late?"

"Not at all. I live by myself. I wasn't so eager to go home, anyway. I'm fine."

She didn't want to go home. Even while digesting the shock that she was hitting on him, he reminded himself that she was "Fujiwara's woman" and straightened up a bit. Saying she didn't want to go home didn't mean she wanted to go home with him. It simply meant she didn't want to go home.

"Well, let's go."

They left the store side by side. She may well be Fujiwara's woman, but getting a bite to eat would do no harm. He wasn't so audacious to think of cuckolding Fujiwara. They were simply going out for a good time and a meal. This was all in the scope of friendship, he told himself.

By the time they got around to searching out a restaurant near the station, it was getting late and all the classy establishments were closing. The taverns were dicey and the bars didn't serve food. Finally, they went into a "family restaurant" in front of the station and sat by the window.

Kaitani didn't have much in the way of sex appeal, but just being in the same room with Sasaguri gave him a sudden surge of verve. After getting the menus, Sasaguri ordered the pasta plate. Kaitani resisted the hamburger special, his favorite, and instead ordered the pizza combo. The hamburger special sounded too much like something a kid would eat.

Sasaguri took a sip of water. "Kaitani-san, you always seem to be in a good mood," she said, almost under her breath.

"I do?"

"You always seem to be running somewhere."

He was always running through the lobby because he was always late to work. And when he did so, his appearance was always a mess. That must have left a strong impression. Starting tomorrow, he pledged to himself, he would absolutely, positively stop running late.

"Are you busy at work?"

He'd set his alarm clock to go off fifteen minutes earlier. Give himself a concrete plan of attack in the morning . . . . Oh, Sasaguri had asked him a question.

"Yeah, pretty much. Next year, the company is launching a new line of men's cosmetics. I'm on the planning and development team. There are lots of preparations to take care of."

"Ah, yes, now that you mention it..."

She seemed familiar with the project, which was discouraging. The reason why somebody not on the team would know about the product launch was obvious: Sasaguri was Fujiwara's woman. No doubt she'd heard about it from him. He couldn't help worrying how Fujiwara spoke of him: He can't do his job, or He's a slob, or He doesn't wash his hands after using the toilet.

He asked, "Does Section Chief Fujiwara ever talk about me?"

The expression on Sasaguri's face plainly stiffened. "Talk about you?" she replied in a small voice.

"I mean, 'He's always late,' stuff like that."

Sasaguri smiled. "Fujiwara-san is not the kind of person who bad-mouths other people."

Her words were like a slap across the face. Fujiwara was a man who didn't speak ill of people. Kaitani was a man on a fishing expedition. No matter how he looked at it, he was in the wrong.

He bowed his head and shut his mouth. Thankfully, their orders were delivered right then. If they were eating, not talking would be perfectly natural. The pizza was delicious but thin, so he ate one piece after the other. About the time he had cleaned off his plate and looked at the woman sitting across from him, he saw that she had hardly touched her pasta and was staring despondently out of the window.

"You're not eating?"

She turned her face slowly to him. "I had a little. I don't have much of an appetite." Sasaguri combed her fingers through her long hair and glanced at Kaitani through upturned eyes. "How has Fujiwara-san been lately?"

Thinking that Sasaguri, if anyone, should know the answer to that question, he answered, "The same as usual, I suppose."

"When you say that he's same as usual—"

"I haven't noticed any particular changes."

Sasaguri let out a little breath of air. Tears tumbled from her big eyes. She put her elbows on the table and covered her face with her hands.

Kaitani's thoughts collapsed in a sudden panic. He had no idea why she had started crying, and no idea of what to say to her. "Um . . . I . . . "

"I'm sorry." She quietly raised her head. "It's just that I suddenly remembered something from the movie."

The tears welled up and rained down in large drops as she spoke. There was no way she was remembering a scene from the movie. These tears had materialized out of thin air.

"Did something bad happen?"

She lowered her head again and didn't answer.

"I'm a good listener. Even when I was in school, my senpai often came to me when they needed somebody to talk to. I'm pretty tight-lipped, so you can trust that I can keep a secret."

Sasaguri raised her head, her rosy cheeks red with tears. She smiled, but it seemed forced. "I was dumped by a guy I liked."

Fujiwara appeared in his mind's eye. At the same time, anger flooded through him. Any guy that would make a girl cry like this must be a real bastard.

"When we broke up, he told me, 'You're not my idea of an ideal woman.' Up to that point, I'd never heard a thing from him about what his ideal was, so it was a real shock to me. If he'd mentioned what type of women he liked, I could have worked toward that ideal for him."

Fujiwara's defamers arose in Kaitani's thoughts and marched forward. Fujiwara was a cad who, under the guise of maintaining his prominence in the public eye, switched lovers every six months or so, picking up a new company girl here and there.

Kaitani leaned across the table. "I'm sure you've heard it before, but the Section Chief is a real player when it comes to women. That's why—"

"I've heard those rumors, too. But I really loved him. When he asked me to go out with him, I was so happy I could have cried. He was really happy, too. We talked every night on the phone. No matter how busy we were, we went on dates every weekend."

She covered her red nose with her hand and sniffled. Kaitani stared at his own clenched hands. The whole thing was so mortifying, so unbearably frustrating. He would never make anybody cry like this, or make them so sad.

"All alone in my apartment, I think about everything and only get more and more depressed. I'm sorry; I'm sitting here springing my problems on you all of a sudden. We haven't ever talked much before."

Kaitani shook his head firmly. "Don't worry about it. Listening to people really is my specialty. I know it's a cliché, but there are plenty of great guys in the world. Not that many are going to be as stuck-up as he is."

Sasaguri's eyes suddenly darkened a shade. "You don't like him, do you?"

It stuck in his craw to admit it, but Fujiwara was the ex-boyfriend she still pined for. Shit, he said to himself, but there was no taking it back, now. "Sorry," he apologized, with a nod of his head. "I'm pretty rough around the edges. I'm never going to see eye-to-eye with a perfectionist guy like the Section Chief. He's handsome and he's good at his job, so I may just be prejudiced."

He was only digging himself in deeper. In response to Kaitani's deprecations, Sasaguri smiled a bit. "Kaitani-san, you're an interesting person."

"No, I mean—"

This really was a pathetic situation, but if he could make her smile, then maybe it was worth it. After that, he pushed the subject of Fujiwara aside, and asked her about the movie she'd seen. They talked almost until midnight, when the trains would stop running, and parted at the station.

When she said, "See you tomorrow," and smiled sweetly and waved, his spirits soared to the heavens. For a moment, the sodden night air evaporated away. Even after he got home, the charming sound of her voice when she said "See you tomorrow" continued to resound in his head, echoing pure bliss.

Chapter 6

Kaitani's cell phone was already indispensable at work. However, the day after he had dinner with Sasaguri, he didn't let it out of his sight. They'd exchanged phone numbers and email addresses the night before.

The next day, she sent him an email that read, "Thank you for lending me your ear yesterday."

He immediately replied, "No problem at all. I really enjoyed talking with you. Let's have dinner again, sometime."

Her most gratifying answer was: "It'd be my pleasure."

Her responses were encouraging, and even better, having just been dumped, she was a free woman on the rebound. "By all means, let's do dinner," he enthusiastically emailed back.

She didn't contact him again for the rest of the day. Kaitani even took his cell phone with him into the bathroom, waiting for her to get back in touch with him.

At the end of the day, having reflected on the gulf between his emotional high and reality, his spirits crashed. He wasn't a high school kid any more. Sending half a dozen emails to somebody who was little more than an acquaintance was simply not done. However, the faint whiff of love in the air had Kaitani keyed up to a degree that he couldn't ignore.

The email he'd been waiting for came the next morning. "Don't be late to work today," wrote this woman, who had no clue about the anguish he'd been going through. As he read it, he realized that rather than rushing at her like a bat out of hell, he should proceed in a sure and steady fashion.

He said "Hello" to her when he arrived at work in the morning, and emailed her every day. Soon, the strict formality of dealing with an unfamiliar colleague melted away, improving to something more akin to friendship.

Because they were nearly the same age to start with, they had a lot to talk about together and their conversations became quite enjoyable.

However, Fujiwara's shadow still occasionally cast a pall over her. Inadvertently mentioning Fujiwara's name brought a startled look to her face. It pained him that she still hadn't put Fujiwara behind her. Sitting across the office from Fujiwara and catching sight of him only stoked the flames of resentment. At this point, Fujiwara still held all the trump cards. But Kaitani would defeat him soon enough. That snob with the Eiffel Tower nose was going down.

The first step in Fujiwara's defeat was the KASHA designs Kaitani had submitted. He was going to push them through to the end and create a miracle hit. Accompanying the accomplishment would be recognition by his co-workers and a boost to his self-confidence.

The design had been tentatively approved,

except for the problem of the production costs. First, with the goal of nailing down the unit cost, Kaitani finally stopped fretting and sent an email to the chief engineer at the Aoba plant in Shinagawa. Figuring there was no point papering over the obvious, he noted that the design was still provisional, but carefully enumerated the extent to which he was personally committed to it, and asked if he could please send him an estimate.

He got a reply right away. He'd wondered if the Aoba engineers would have anything to say to a run-of-the-mill employee like himself, and was surprised when they quickly came back with a number. Their cost estimation was the second surprise. Setting the market price at a percentage of the unit cost was general practice. A steel container of this particular design pressed the upper limits, with a market price estimated at 150 percent of unit cost.

In a world where price wars were fought over a single yen, a markup of 150 percent was cutting it very close.

After sending many emails back and forth wrestling with this issue, the Aoba engineers concluded that: "Considering the material costs of steel, manufacturing the bottle domestically is cost-prohibitive, but our factory in China might be able to handle it." They sent along the telephone number and email address for a Mr. Yanai at the factory in China.

Kaitani immediately sent an email off to China. The chief engineer from the Aoba plant had already contacted Yanai on his behalf. Kaitani soon got a phone call from Yanai. Yanai's strong accent placed his birthplace in the northern prefectures of Japan. He had a lively manner of speaking that reminded Kaitani of his high school baseball coach, and he projected that same aura of friendly intimacy.

The base unit cost could be pushed down to permit a maximum markup of 90 percent. Once they'd settled on the unit cost, there was the matter of the finished product itself. Aware that he was asking a lot, Kaitani asked if they could produce a one-off prototype. The designs were not final, and since it was a personal request, he should feel free to turn it down, but Yanai cheerfully responded, "Sure, you betcha!"

In the middle of July, the on-site engineer at Cavi's Chinese plant delivered the pièce de résistance, the dragon design container, via overnight express. The next day, at two o'clock, after yet another noonday news broadcast announcing yet another record high temperature for the summer, the joint committee meeting between R&D and Sales Promotion commenced.

The simpler of the two designs Shiozawa had created would be presented at the meeting. That's why Kaitani had to get the demo bottle in-time.

First on the agenda was the basic cosmetic lotion, beginning with a presentation of the second prototype. There were no significant changes in the actual substance, but R&D wanted them to see for themselves, and several plastic jars were handed out.

As soon as it picked one up, Kaitani's immediate reaction was, "Huh?"

The texture wasn't different in the slightest, but he only thought this for a moment. Spreading out the

gooey liquid, it felt like it absorbed into the skin many times faster that the earlier version, without a touch of stickiness. While it had an invigorating scent, it was mildly refreshing when applied to the skin, and its overall feel was many times improved.

When everybody had tried the lotion, Higashiyama calmly asked, "What do you think?" The firm expression on his face brimmed with confidence. "I'd like to draw your attention to the previous matter of the texture. We investigated it again, but concluded that we could sacrifice neither its efficacy nor distinctiveness. Therefore, we have made considerable improvement in other areas. By combing beauty serum compounds, we've managed to increase skin permeability, moisturizing, and anti-inflammatory properties 130 percent. As for the cost, we have arranged for guaranteed, periodical shipments of the raw materials—consisting of high quality medicinal herbs—from a cooperative in Fujian Province, China. We've noted the particulars concerning the raw materials in our report. We were able to keep costs under the indicated baseline."

This was the result of three week's work. Amazing, Kaitani thought. He'd seen plenty of women's cosmetics thus far in his career, but this was the first time he'd witnessed such an achievement in so short a time. It hadn't struck home the last time, but this time he was convinced it would work. Thinking it was a sure-fire winner, he glanced at the Eiffel Towel proboscis of his boss sitting two chairs over.

Fujiwara wore a look of obvious displeasure on his face. "I understand the points made by R&D."

At the sound of his voice, the murmur of people talking ceased. The conference room fell silent. "However, this is unacceptable. I said previously that the texture was a problem, and it hasn't been addressed at all."

"We discussed this earlier," said Higashiyama.

Fujiwara coldly cut him off. "I am not asking for anything particularly difficult. It seems to me that the texture is simply a matter of adjusting the proportions of the basic ingredients. I don't understand why we're still fussing over the texture at this juncture. I've made it clear that it's a significant cause of concern when it comes to sales. Are you trying to deliberately undermine this project?"

Kaitani said nothing. Despite all their hard work, because R&D had submitted a product with so few obvious changes, slandering them with accusations of "undermining the project" was apparently fair game.

Higashiyama must have felt the same way. His normally placid face was tinged with malice. "Change the composition of the basic materials will significantly compromise the moisturizing protection qualities."

Higashiyama and Fujiwara stared daggers at each other. Fujiwara looked away first. He brushed his bangs back and sighed. "It's hard to understand what you can't see. In any case, it's still too early for that product to go to market. Were we to try to market something that different, it would only be released as a newly-developed product after KASHA was on-track and heading in the right direction. There's no need to go off on adventures tangential to the introduction of this critical line."

Because of the importance of this new product line, Higashiyama wanted it to be exceptional. Fujiwara was so much as telling him that those feelings didn't count.

"If the texture of the lotion can't be improved, there's nothing more to be done. I'll use the lotion developed for the CHAPS line in its place."

Higashiyama stared at him, his mouth half-open.

"Section Chief Fujiwara." R&D department head Takanaga had remained silent up to this point. Now she rose to her feet. "If the current product is used instead, then calling KASHA a new product will be meaningless. You need to show some empathy for the R&D staff involved in this research effort."

"And yet you keep trying to create a product I don't want."

It was quiet enough in the room to hear a pin drop. With a listless and disinterested expression, Fujiwara said, "Let's continue with the meeting," while turning to the meeting chair, Osada.

After a flicker of hesitation, Osada said, "The matter of the lotion is again set aside for further consideration. Let's move on to the bottle design, it being more or less settled. First, I'd like everybody to take a look at the design drawings."

The proof sheets passed around were of the "simple" version. As a reference, there were illustrations of the entire line using that design. If he'd seen them without any preconceptions, he would have probably thought, "Simple is stylish." To Kaitani's eyes, though, this calculated simplicity only projected a kind of superficiality.

Nobody said anything. Fujiwara's outbursts still weighed heavily on the mood. Kaitani girded up his loins and raised his hand.

"Kaitani-san, go ahead."

He didn't have to stand, but he did, anyway. With a dubious expression, Fujiwara leaned his head back and looked at him sideways. Kaitani said, "This concerns the design drawings for the line. In fact, there is one more proposal. I would like you to take a look at these."

Kaitani passed around copies of the dragon design he had prepared beforehand. A stir went around the room, followed by murmurs of conversation.

"This is pretty interesting," said a young woman.

A man in his forties nodded and muttered, "It's been a while since I've seen anything this elaborate. It's refreshing, for a change."

"There were some cost concerns with this design. But we were able to lower costs to the target price. This is the prototype we came up with."

Kaitani took the prototype bottle he'd gotten from the engineer in China from a paper bag. Cries of awe rang out as the bottle was slowly passed around the oval table.

"Pretty cool, don't you think? It doesn't even look like a lotion container."

"Not too high-class, but not low-grade. Imparts a unique image, but in a good way, don't you think?"

Listening to the voices of everybody around him, Kaitani felt his confidence growing. It was going to work. It was really going to work! He turned his thoughts toward Fujiwara. So, he wanted to say, how's them apples? They're all saying the design I've been pushing is better than yours is.

Fujiwara averted his eyes. Kaitani was sure the day had finally come when Fujiwara was going to have to kowtow to him. Fujiwara said, "The dragon design you've handed out today remains a secondary proposal. The final decision has not been made, but please keep in mind that there's a 99 percent certainty we'll be going with the first design."

The shock of such a certainty felt like a one-ton weight being dropped on his head. From the positive responses alone, there was no way he could accept an assessment. "What are you saying that for? The survey results were positive. I did exactly what you said and put more thought into the cost issues. The reactions to the prototype are good. That being the case, what the hell's wrong with these designs?"

In his excitement, he forgot that he was addressing a superior.

Unlike the red-hot Kaitani, Fujiwara was cool and composed. "As with the lotion that was demonstrated today, there's the possibility that the design you're promoting will turn off some users."

"Um—" A twenty-something woman from R&D raised her slender arm. "I think the design is quite interesting. Very eye-catching. It seems to go well with the Kasha concept."

As if on-cue, the conference room turned noisy with people talking.

"That's right."

"It sure has that effect on me."

Raising his voice to a shout, Section Chief Fujiwara drowned them out. "As head of the Sales Promotion department, I have something to say. The second design proposal is rejected. If the texture of the lotion is not changed, then we will use the lotion from the previous line in its place. That is all."

As soon as he was done speaking, he stood up and left the room, not with an air of irritation, but with the exasperated attitude that he didn't want to waste any more of his time talking with a bunch of know-nothings.

It was the judgment of a tyrant, handed down allowing no room for disagreement. The focus of his anger gone, Kaitani stared blankly at the rejected prototype bottle with its twisting dragon design.

Chapter 7

Don, don, don. Kaitani struck the plastic drinking glass against the tabletop. "What an asshole. Un-freaking-believable."

He was sitting at a table with Higashiyama and Shiozawa in Kemuri, that strange, little tavern, and all other concerns were pushed aside except for the alcohol and cuisine. But every time he thought about the meeting that afternoon, his gut began to burn and he couldn't help but blurt out.

Even the otherwise mild-mannered Higashiyama furrowed his brows. The sour look wouldn't leave his face. "I thought I had an objective view on things, but this last incident just pisses me off. He's treating R&D like fools. Something's wrong with the materials, he says. Yeah, tell me about it! The texture is all we've been obsessing about."

"Yeah," said Kaitani, in hearty agreement. "I happen to think that improved lotion is great. A sure winner, if we went with it. Together with the dragon design I've been pushing, there'd be nothing to fear. It'd be a hit, no doubt about it. Except for that shit-for-brains!"

Having their say in a corner of a tavern still didn't amount to more than a bunch of bottom dogs howling at the moon. The decisions of the Section Chief running Sales Promotion were absolute. They all knew this, but that didn't quell the frustration or soothe the sting of defeat.

"I liked it, too, that dragon," Shiozawa grumbled. "But it's not like I don't know where Section Chief Fujiwara is coming from. Common sense says that people are going to express their preferences when it comes to something so unique."

"But everybody said they liked it. Except for Fujiwara, they all liked the dragon design. That's why, no matter how you look at it, rejecting it doesn't make sense."

"That's how conservative he is. The first time I met him, I couldn't help thinking how strangely dull he seemed. That may because he's so methodical, though."

Engulfed by an unbearable sense of futility, Kaitani started on his third beer. The beer mugs at Kemuri were made of plastic. At first he'd thought, "What the hell?" At least for today, plastic was fine. Hit it, drop it, tip it over, and a plastic glass wouldn't break. Higashiyama had told him before that these mugs were American-made "antiques," but Kaitani was sure the proprietress didn't have a clue about stuff like that.

Higashiyama folded his arms and spoke with a thoughtful expression. "Even though I can't go so far as to agree with Section Chief Fujiwara's way of doing things, I can usually support him. I understand his conservative approach, too. This time, when it comes to KASHA, he's playing it way more safely than he needs to. Whether it's the lotion or the design, I find it interesting that rather than giving the creators the benefit of the doubt, Kaitani and I have had to fight to be heard.

The possibility is that it will be well-received in the marketplace, a real winner. I think the odds are with us. That's why I find it so strange. Even for a conservative, I believed that Section Chief Fujiwara was the type that played it closer to the vest, was capable of more dispassionate decision making."

Shiozawa nodded his head. "In the final analysis, is Section Chief Fujiwara the one holding all the cards?"

Higashiyama hunched his shoulders. "That's the way things stand. Without his stamp of approval, nothing goes forward smoothly."

Kaitani set his plastic mug down on the table with a thump. That's right. The root of the evil was that man. With him out of the picture, the dragon design would emerge from under the shadows. "Here's what we do," he said. "We beat the crap out of him until he gives us an Okay. Rough him up a bit, and a candy-ass nancy boy like him will cave without a fight."

Higashiyama smiled wryly. "You'll get yourself arrested doing something like that."

In the end, nothing came of the three of them sitting there bitching and moaning. No obvious resolution presented itself. The conclusion had already been announced: "Unacceptable." No matter how hard they tried, the work of one man canceled out everything they did. Kaitani felt it in his bones.

But still, it was good to spend a raucous evening shooting the shit. After they split up, though, Kaitani wanted to cry like a baby. More than the sheer disconsolation, the failure was deeply frustrating.

He'd believe that if he did his job and cleaned up his appearance, what he had to say would get a fair hearing.

He'd about reached his own neighborhood when his cell phone rang. It was an innocuous text message from Sasaguri about an interesting sales and marketing man who'd been to the company earlier that day. He called back anyway, forgetting that last thing he wanted to do was engage in platonic chitchat, and also forgetting how late it was.

Even in the middle of the night, her voice was as pretty as a songbird's. Kaitani said, "Something bad happened. Sorry it's so late."

"Oh, no problem. It's fine. I couldn't sleep and I wanted to talk to somebody."

At the sound of such gentle, caring words, he almost broke down. "The design I pitched at the meeting today was turned down flat. I've been pretty down since."

"You mean that design you did so much research on, and even talked to the factory about? The prototype you were going to get from the plant in China and show to everybody?"

"Yeah, I showed off the prototype, but it's still unacceptable."

"That's too bad. And after trying so hard..."

In response to her kind words, tears welled up in the corners of his eyes. "No matter how much work I put in, Section Chief Fujiwara doesn't want to see it. As a rule, he doesn't want to know what I did, but what will sell."

Although he'd resolved not to badmouth Section Chief Fujiwara in front of her, he couldn't help the words that slipped out. "Most of the people at the meeting said that the design I was presenting was really good. Despite that, he trashed it in a single word: Unacceptable. I can't stand it."

A mutual silence followed. At last she said, "Fujiwara-san is very dedicated to his job."

Kaitani had the sense she was defending Fujiwara, and it annoyed him. "He doesn't understand what he's putting us through."

"That's not true."

"After all, the top dogs don't know what it's like to be one of us also-rans. A guy as perfect as Fujiwara hasn't got a worry in the world."

"Don't say that! Even Fujiwara-san has problems that cause him a great deal of anguish."

"He's got the looks, he's got the brains. He became a section chief at his age. He can do whatever he sets his mind to. What's a guy like him got to worry about?"

"He does. Fujiwara-san has a big inferiority complex about his body."

Kaitani pulled a face. "What inferiority complex? He's tall, he's handsome. What woman doesn't think he's perfect?"

"It's not what you can see. He told me that when he was a child, his back was burned really badly in a fire. The keloid scars that formed afterward still mar his back. He said that's why, even with a lover, he won't take off his shirt, or ever take off all his clothes."

Kaitani bit his lip. He had nothing to say.

"Everybody has their own demons. It's too bad that nobody acknowledged all your hard work. But it's wrong to blame other people."

The call ended. Kaitani was the one who hung up. Neither his ears nor his heart could take any more. On top of the double-whammy to the body, the sense of hopelessness hit him like a solid uppercut to the jaw. He slumped down to the sidewalk. He didn't know how to console himself. The words wouldn't come to him. His apartment wasn't far off, but he didn't want to go home. He crashed there in the middle of the sidewalk.

Kaitani slept in the middle of the sidewalk until three A.M., when a police officer on bike patrol awakened him. The police had received reports of a body lying in the road, the officer informed him, and he was warned to shape up and behave like a responsible member of society. Kaitani tottered back home.

He hated his room, as still and quiet as the bottom of the ocean. So he turned on the television. Some old movie was playing. There was so much crap crammed inside his head, while his heart was empty as the desert. Kaitani stared listlessly at the television screen. The lead actress, an Occidental woman, was quite pretty. She was arguing with a man.

She turned to him and spat out, "I'll do whatever it takes to get what I want."

The words appeared in the subtitles. It was a hackneyed phrase by now, but it struck a chord in Kaitani's gut.

I'll do whatever it takes to get what I want.

Whatever it takes. Whatever it takes—

The dawn approached. In his room, Kaitani mumbled the same words repeatedly.

Chapter 8

The meeting had ended without R&D reaching any sort of understanding with Fujiwara. All that was settled was the time of the next meeting: August 4th. In terms of scheduling, Osada said, that would probably be their last conference.

In the midst of all this, Kuge, the office manager for the Sales Promotion department who sat at the desk directly across from Kaitani, quit the company to get married. Her fiancé had suddenly decided to return home, and Kuge decided to go with him.

Up until the announcement, Kaitani hadn't been aware that Kuge's fiancé was from Scotland. After making the announcement, the second time he asked her, "If he's from Scotland, doesn't that make him English?" she angrily retorted, "Go buy a map!"

She teased him and gave him a playful jab now and then, but Kuge was the one superior that treated him more affectionately than anybody else. Kaitani took the initiative to plan a farewell party for her. Kuge apparently had to make all kinds of preparations prior to her departure and would be quite busy, so he moved things up a bit and scheduled the party on the 20th of July.

The farewell party was held at a little pub not far from the company. Kuge said she wanted Japanese sake to be served. Of course, Fujiwara also attended the

farewell party. He was flanked by two striking beauties who kept all others at bay. He didn't talk much and nursed his beer. Fujiwara would attend a drinking party like this if asked, but he usually latched onto somebody midway through the festivities and slipped away. However, today he seemed determined to stay until the end. He must have had something in-mind.

Kaitani corralled a number of junior staffers and told them, "Hey, let's drink Section Chief Fujiwara under the table today." He secretly set up his plan. "Once he's drunk," he lied, stirring up interest and curiosity, "I hear that he'll start taking off his clothes."

The junior staffers were all women, and while they expressed disgust with the idea, the thought of their handsome section chief putting on a little burlesque show intrigued them, so they pushed aside his flanking guards and set about pouring sake for him.

"Kaitani!"

Kuge sidled up to him, in a fairly sloshed condition. She was wearing a simple, thin dress. "Thank you so much for everything. You really went all-out for me."

"You're really taken good care of me, Kuge-san."

She laughed. "Yeah, I guess I looked after you. The first time I saw you, I really had to wonder why we hired you. But when I heard you had connections in the company, it made sense. You didn't even try to hide it. A total fish out of water. Sort of like fawning over an incompetent child, not? You must have tickled my maternal instincts."

Her blunt manner of speaking made him feel uneasy. "You think I'm incompetent?"

"Either that or you just don't give a damn."

His shoulders drooped dejectedly and she whacked him on the back, hard enough to hurt. "Lately, though, with the Section Chief riding your ass, you seemed to have turned it around. I've even been hearing good things from Osada. Section Chief Fujiwara may come across as a prig, but he's not a bad guy, just one of those real guarded types. I think that's why, when he gets stuck with a happy-go-lucky hothead like you, you don't get along very well."

Not at all, not in the slightest, he didn't have to add, and pretended to laugh.

Kuge peered up at his face. "If you keep working hard at a job, it'll get interesting, don't you think? Better than having people teach you, it's a lot more fun studying things and thinking them through on your own, eh?"

"Yeah, sure."

"If you at least understand that, then you're growing. After this, Section Chief Fujiwara is going to whip you into shape, so be a man and make me proud."

Kuge was drawn away by another woman and moved to another seat. Watching her from a distance, Kaitani realized that she really was going away, and felt a sudden pang of loneliness. Even when they worked overtime and she sent him to buy snacks, and before major events when she worked him like a mule, he could sense from her words and actions that she cared for him.

But that man was different.

Kaitani put on a mask, like an actor playing a part, and approached Fujiwara. With all the mingling going on, people should have been pouring him drinks right and left. The look on his face hadn't change in the slightest. Kaitani vaguely recalled hearing that Fujiwara could hold his alcohol. His internal stamina was amazing.

With effort, he forced a cheerful tone into his voice and said, "Thank you for all you've done for me." Seeing that it was Kaitani, the lovely young lasses who wouldn't have otherwise surrendered a seat, gave him a "what the hell" expression and made room.

"What are you drinking? Oh, beer, I see. You're a wine connoisseur, aren't you? How about some Japanese sake? They have several varieties here. This one looks delicious."

As he chatted, he handed Fujiwara an empty tumbler. Fujiwara seemed a bit confused, but decided perhaps that turning Kaitani down would be rude, so he took the glass. Kaitani picked up the sake flask and filled the tumbler all the way to the brim. He did this deliberately. Fujiwara immediately put his lips to the side of the glass to keep the liquid from sloshing over.

"Man, I'm sorry about causing so much trouble all the time," Kaitani said. As he was an actor today, he could humbly apologize and say what was not in his heart, tell lies like, "You're doing a great job." Fujiwara didn't deny it. Strangely, in an honest moment, Kaitani would have admitted to being offended.

"But after this, I'm really putting my all into my work, so I'd like to thank you in advance." Fujiwara drained his glass in a gulp. Without missing a beat, Kaitani refilled the tumbler with the remaining sake in the flask, ignoring Fujiwara's protests. "That's how I feel, man. Drink up."

With a puzzled expression on his face, Fujiwara took a sip of the sake. He said, "First of all, you really need to study. It may be harsh, but I've got no interest in people who don't want to improve themselves."

You talking about me? Kaitani wanted to ask him but didn't. If Fujiwara had said "Yes," Kaitani didn't think he could have restrained himself from wringing the man's neck. "I'll do my best," he laughed hollowly.

He disciplined his emotions and continued his acting job. As he talked, Fujiwara worked away at each drink Kaitani poured. When it came to sake, the man must have a hollow leg. He looked at Fujiwara and their eyes met. Fujiwara scrutinized him from top to bottom, staring at him with an ill-mannered directness. He laughed through his nose.

If Kaitani hadn't been acting, he would have dumped the rest of the flask over the man's head. That was what he really wanted to do. He only resisted because this was Kuge's farewell party, and having set it up, he felt responsible. He had the feeling if he sat next to this guy any longer he was going to blow a fuse.

Leaving the sake flask where it was, he got up and returned to where he had been sitting before. When he did, some of the junior staffers he'd conspired with to "drink Fujiwara under the table" came up to him.

"Kaitani-san, the Section Chief isn't getting drunk at all. No matter how many drinks we give him—"

"He sure isn't."

"Between the beer and sake, he's drained almost two liters."

"Two liters? No way."

"We're not kidding. Every time we had a round with the Section Chief, he drank his. I was watching him the whole time. He had six or seven glasses of beer. After that, he had five or six tumblers of sake with me and Yoshino-san and the senior staff. It comes to two liters, easy."

The words, the formidable Fujiwara, flitted across his mind.

"If he gets drunk, is he really going to start taking his clothes off? His face isn't getting red, and he's talking normal. He is a bit more preachy than usual—"

They scolded him in pouting tones. Taken aback, he dissembled, saying. "It's just something I heard, too," and hurried off to the lavatory. The beer had made a beeline for his bladder. Leaving the bathroom, he suddenly jumped. Fujiwara was leaning against the wall opposite the men's room, striking a pose like a male model.

"Wash your hands?" he asked in a low tenor voice.

Kaitani flashed back to the incident in the company lavatory. "Yeah, I washed my hands," Kaitani said, glaring at him.

"Really?"

"Really."

"Let's see your handkerchief."

Kaitani produced the handkerchief from the pocket of his slacks, one that he'd gotten from Fujiwara, though it'd been in his pocket for about a week.

"Hmph," Fujiwara laughed, and disappeared into the toilet. With him out of sight, Kaitani found himself relieved and furious at the same time. On the spur of the moment, he'd lost his nerve and handed over the handkerchief. He really was a miserable excuse for a man.

He'd helped himself to two more glasses of beer when a waiter came up to tell him that their reserved time was almost over. He quickly glanced at his watch. He asked Kuge to say some parting words, presented her with a bouquet of flowers, and brought the farewell party to a close.

By not having gotten Fujiwara roaring drunk, he hadn't achieved his objective this time around. Rather, it was a complete wash. And outside the men's room, when he handed over his handkerchief to Fujiwara, he'd lost. In fact, when it came right down to it, the evening was a total bust.

After he squared up accounts and left the bar, there were only four or five people remaining. He'd put a junior staffer in charge of the after-party, and it looked like Kuge had gone on ahead of him.

"Hey, I don't see the Section Chief around," Osada whispered in his ear.

"Didn't he already leave with somebody, like he usually does?" he answered, not wanting to hear that "Hmph" from Fujiwara again.

"But his shoes are still there. Those straight tips are his, aren't they?"

Kaitani had no idea what kind of shoes Fujiwara wore. But as he was the guy nominally in charge, he was duty-bound to put forth a token effort looking for him. He sighed.

"Excuse me." Kaitani turned as a worried-looking waiter came out of the bar. "There's a man sitting down in the lavatory. When I asked, he wouldn't give me his name. Another of the waiters thought he had attended your banquet. Perhaps he is one of your party?"

Now that Kaitani thought about it, Fujiwara had gone into the bathroom after him and hadn't come out. Kaitani ran to the men's room in the bar. Fujiwara was slumped on the lavatory floor. Kaitani shook him and called his name several times, but Fujiwara didn't answer. Unbelievably, he was dead drunk.

The last time they were in a lavatory together, this man had told him to wash his hands. Now he had planted himself on the floor. Kaitani felt like shaking him to his senses and telling him, "Hey, jackass, your hands are touching the bathroom floor."

With the waiter helping him, Kaitani hoisted the drunk onto his back. He didn't have much energy left, but Fujiwara was lighter than he'd imagined. When they left the bar, Osada took one look at her unconscious boss and her eyes widened in surprise.

Kaitani said, "He had one too many and is dead to the world. I'll take him home. Give my best to Kuge."

He cheerfully loaded the intoxicated Fujiwara into a taxi, and pushed him against the opposite car door, as far away from himself as he could manage. He punched the air in exhilaration. A very blotto banzai! This was exactly the situation he'd been waiting for, the reason why he'd put a junior staffers in charge of the after-party.

"Where to?" the taxi driver asked.

Kaitani had consulted the corporate directory beforehand and gave the driver Fujiwara's address; Kaitani had correctly predicted a situation like this in which Fujiwara would be too drunk to coherently tell the driver where he lived.

After a twenty-minute taxi ride, they arrived at what appeared to be Fujiwara's apartment building. It was a high-class establishment in the center of a residential neighborhood, not far from the heart of the city. An ideal place to live, close to the station, close to the park. Looking up at the tall, tall building, Kaitani idly wondered exactly how much Fujiwara paid for the place.

Carrying Fujiwara on his back, he walked through the main entranceway. There was an automated security door in front of the elevator. With no idea how to open it, Kaitani just stood there when a woman, probably a resident, strode past him, produced a cardkey, and opened the door.

Kaitani dumped Fujiwara in a corner of the lobby and went through his briefcase. Inside Fujiwara's billfold, he found the same kind of card. Cardkey in hand, the door opened without a hitch. They rode the elevator to the 16th floor, and then Kaitani hauled him to apartment 1616. The cardkey also opened the front

door. He deposited Fujiwara in the genkon and found the light.

Something like a showroom appeared before him, clean and simple. Straight in from the genkon was the living room. With the master of the house still out cold, Kaitani quickly prowled the interior. He guessed the generously sized living room was about fifteen tatami mats in area. The walls were a cream color, the floors finished with dark hardwood. The living room set was light brown. He sat down to test out the sofa. It was so soft he felt like he was getting absorbed into the cushions. There was some objet d'art fabricated out of steel he didn't get, but even so, it was cool.

The kitchen didn't look lived-in, either. Not a single utensil or piece of cookware was left out. He peeked in the refrigerator and found nothing there but some cheese and veggies. The bathroom, too, looked like what you'd find in a hotel after room service. Pure white linens were folded and stacked in an open closet.

Besides the living room and kitchen, there were two other rooms. Kaitani investigated these as well. One turned out to be a study and the other was the bedroom.

Showing no signs of life, the room struck him as cold and inorganic. A splitting image of the owner, Kaitani thought. He couldn't relax in a place like this. To be honest, it somehow turned him off. The only thing that attracted his attention was the city nightscape visible from the living room window. The twinkling lights were very pretty, like a faraway amusement park.

"How does this place cost you?" he muttered to himself. There was, of course, no reply to his question.

At any rate, it was time to do what he came here to do. Kaitani hauled the sleeping Fujiwara from the genkon to the bed in the bedroom and deposited him on the sheets. He noticed that he hadn't removed Fujiwara's shoes. After puzzling over it for a few moments, he tossed the shoes in the corner of the room. He imagined Fujiwara's shock and horror when he woke up in the morning and realized that he'd walked all the way to the bedroom with his shoes on, and laughed to himself.

He laid Fujiwara on the bed face up, took hold of his shirt, and undid each button one by one. Fujiwara, his eyes completely closed, didn't react at all. When Kaitani had undone all the buttons, he rolled him over like a store manikin so he was now lying face down.

"Oh, damn, the camera."

Kaitani rushed back to the living room and extracted from his suit coat pocket the digital camera he had concealed there. Back in the bedroom, he seized the sleeping man's shirt by the collar.

I'll do whatever it takes to get what I want.

Today, he was that woman on the silver screen. No matter how low the road, Fujiwara was accepting his dragon design. The means didn't matter, only the end. Kaitani took a deep breath and in a single yank, ripped the shirt off him.

"What the hell?"

Kaitani held the shirt in his hand and gaped. The beautiful, white back that appeared before his eyes showed not a scar, not a blemish. Sasaguri said that Fujiwara's back was covered with keloid scars from a fire he suffered as a child, scars so ugly that he wouldn't reveal them to his lovers, or even take his shirt off in bed.

Perhaps, Kaitani thought, the scars were located lower on his back. He pulled Fujiwara's trousers halfway down his ass, but the man's buttocks were just as white. There wasn't a scar anywhere.

Leaving Fujiwara like that, the upper half of his body naked, half-exposed below the waist, Kaitani sat down at the foot of the bed and pondered these new developments. Why weren't there any scars on Fujiwara's back? Even when he makes love, he doesn't take his clothes off, Sasaguri had said. Kaitani didn't think she was lying. She didn't have any reason to lie. Which meant that when Fujiwara did it, like he said, he kept his shirt on. But what the hell for?

With a flash of insight, Kaitani bounded to his feet. He stared down at his snoring snob of a boss, sleeping there with his ass half sticking out. Fujiwara was the liar, the one pulling the wool over Sasaguri's eyes. And why? Why? Because that was the way the rake worked.

The story about being burned in a fire—not even taking his shirt off—the whole thing was part of the performance, the way he got women in bed. Give a woman a hint of a man's injury or trauma and she'd go all weak in the knees. He'd appeal to her sympathies, and then little by little . . . . With the right technique, a man like that could pick up women right and left.

Kaitani glared at his half-naked boss. His original plan had been to get Fujiwara drunk so he could take pictures of his scarred back. His intent had been to take pictures of his awful scars and then threaten to spread the proof around the company unless he gave the okay to the dragon design and R&D's lotion formulation.

Taking advantage of a man's weakness was fighting dirty. But even if it meant turning into a total scumbag, Kaitani was going to get the dragon design the recognition it deserved, and this was the only hand he had left to play.

The plan had gone accordingly, until he'd gotten the man naked. There was just this little problem with there being no marks on his back. And that meant, in the dirty rotten scoundrel department, Fujiwara had him beat by half.

“Shit.” Kaitani kicked the skirting of the oversized bed with his heels. It hurt, but he was pissed off. Looking at the half-naked man sleeping there so comfortably and peacefully, it occurred to him that this situation was more than a little compromising. Fujiwara wasn't a kid with his pants hanging halfway down his ass, but an adult who wouldn't otherwise be caught dead in this state of undress. Realizing this, Kaitani aimed the camera at Fujiwara's exposed backside.

He snapped off five shots. Fujiwara's rear end was in the perfect position, plenty big enough through the viewfinder, but his face didn't come into the shot. By itself, it was just a picture of somebody mooning the camera. No big deal. If he told somebody this was Fujiwara, it'd provoke at best a snicker or two.

He looked for an angle that would make Fujiwara's identity obvious. The next shot took in his

head down to his buttocks. But since Fujiwara was laying face-down, it was still hard to make out who it was. Realizing that he wouldn't get anywhere with Fujiwara on his back, Kaitani rolled the body over.

Enshrined in his exposed nether regions was what Kaitani would describe as standard equipment. Not too small, not too short—a package he couldn't make fun of. The shape was so-so, and he was circumcised. If Kaitani had to cite a specific characteristic, Fujiwara pubic hair was lighter, and his member, if anything, was pinker. That was it.

Kaitani yanked off Fujiwara's trousers and undershorts. He didn't remove Fujiwara's rumpled socks. The socks looked silly enough as is. He snapped a picture of Fujiwara that included both his face and crotch, and took several more from a different angle.

After a while, though, the whole thing started getting pointless. Why in the world was he taking nude photos of some guy he hated? Despite committing himself to getting down and dirty, this was just pathetic. Kaitani tossed the digital camera aside, but then roused himself to his feet. He couldn't go down to defeat like this! He had to believe in himself! The world deserved to see the dragon design! He pulled his thoughts together, retrieved the camera from the corner of the bed and checked the photos he'd already shot.

Sure, he had nude shots of Fujiwara in full Monty, but they lacked something. He had doubts whether Fujiwara would really fine them intimidating enough. Even if Kaitani said he was going to circulate them, Fujiwara could very well call his bluff and say, "Go ahead, coward. Make my day."

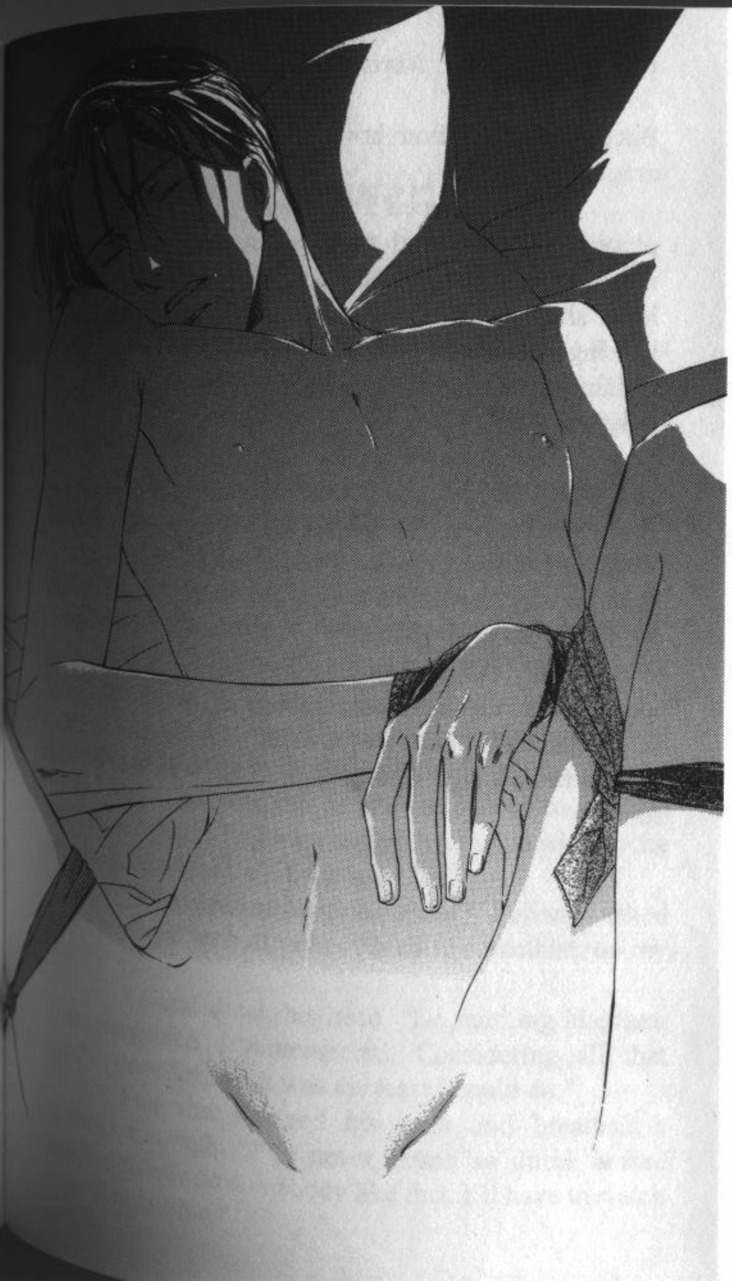
If the photographs were really compromising, Fujiwara should feel the heat, then. How to compose a more compromising scene? As he pondered this question, the word hentai flitted through his brain. Yes, something sexually deviant, that would do the trick. Kaitani desperately dredged up scenes from a porn video he'd watched a while ago.

What caught his eye was the necktie. Yes, tying him up would definitely lend the whole scene a hentai flavor. Kaitani immediately got Fujiwara's necktie and bound his limp wrists. Though he tied the knot firmly, Fujiwara remained meek as a kitten. If Kaitani tied his feet back in a stirrups-up position, like the cover art on a hentai DVD, he would appear all the more depraved.

Kaitani ransacked Fujiwara's closet, grabbing several neckties. He knotted the ties together in twos and bound each thigh tightly to its corresponding ankle. With Fujiwara's crotch fully exposed, the next picture took on the real feel of hentai.

Caught up in the moment, Kaitani checked out other pornographic angles. He piled the pillow and sheets under Fujiwara back, leaning his body forward, and snapped a low-angle shot from below. As he reviewed the shot, Kaitani noticed a certain laxness between Fujiwara's legs. In every picture, his penis listed to the left.

What to do about that? Kaitani took a good, hard look at the item. Something was missing. He saw the one, but not the other. He wanted to make sure, but he had no desire to actually touch Fujiwara down there.



But extrapolating from how his own family jewels were attached—

Kaitani draped a tie over Fujiwara's penis and picked up his flaccid member. A man's testicles so displayed should naturally form a pretty upside-down heart shape, but the left side of this heart was sadly missing. It looked like it'd been that way all along. Kaitani gritted his teeth and touched it, but there was only one there.

The guffaws welled up from the pit of his stomach. Clasping his hands together and turning his face to the heavens, he roared with laughter. Everything made sense—why Fujiwara lied about getting burned as a child, why he wouldn't have sex with his shirt off. It was all to cover up this.

He was Section Chief of the Sales Promotion department, the handsome master of ennui, the lady-killer known as "the unbared man." But the real Yasuhito Fujiwara had only one of a pair. He was the uni-ball man.

Chapter 9

Fujiwara always got to work at eight A.M. The day after Kuge's farewell party, he barely arrived in time for the morning meeting at eight-thirty. Even though he missed being late only by a whisker, not a hair was out of place and his suit was perfectly pressed. Still, his expression was clouded and his color was not good.

As soon as the meeting ended, Fujiwara called Kaitani over to his desk. "According to Osada, I got drunk last night and you took me back to my apartment. I'm sorry for whatever inconveniences I might have caused you."

Seeing the necktie adorning Fujiwara's chest, Kaitani could hold back the bubble of mirth that rose to his lips. That was the necktie he'd used to pick up Fujiwara's penis. Fujiwara had put on the tie without the slightest idea what it'd been used for.

"What are you laughing about?" Fujiwara asked in a chagrined tone of voice. "Is there something on my face?"

Kaitani shook his head. "No, nothing like that. Just something I remembered. Considering all that you've done for me, it was the least I could do."

Fujiwara lowered his eyes and breathed a melancholic sigh. "I've never gotten so drunk before and had to rely on somebody like that. I'll have to watch myself next time."

Kaitani took the spell of silence that followed to mean the conversation was over. “Excuse me,” he said, and started to leave.

“Hey,” Fujiwara said. “Um, I didn’t do anything odd yesterday, did I?”

Wondering if what happened last night was coming back to him, Kaitani queried, “Anything odd?”

“When I woke up, my shoes were on the bedroom floor. I find it difficult to imagine lacking such common sense. In such a state of mind, I can’t help feeling that I did something very foolish.”

Kaitani nodded his head, feigning innocence. “You didn’t do anything that out of the ordinary. Other than getting drunk and falling asleep in the lavatory.”

At the mention of the word “lavatory,” Fujiwara’s already pale face grew a shade greener.

“I brought you as far as the genkon of your apartment.”

As if he couldn’t bear any more details, Fujiwara shook his head. “That’s enough,” he said, sending him away. “Time to go back to work.”

After returning to his desk, every time he caught view of Fujiwara, Kaitani snickered and had to restrain himself from bursting into laughter.

No matter how meticulously he styled and set his hair, and clothed himself in the most expensive suits, and deported himself like the hippest of Hollywood actors, Fujiwara was still a man with only one of a pair. Along with a subtle sense of superiority, Kaitani felt a touch of compassion for this foe of his who had to lie in order to conceal his missing testicle.

Observing Fujiwara’s profile, which was showing fifty percent more ennui than normal, Kaitani pondered when and where to broach the subject in-question.

Chapter 10

At six-thirty that evening, Fujiwara began clearing off his desk and getting ready to go home.

Since talking with him now wouldn't get in the way of his work, Kaitani stood up and walked over to him. "Have a nice evening," he said.

"You, too," Fujiwara nodded weakly in return

"I was wondering if I could take a few minutes of your time. There's something important I'd like to discuss with you."

Fujiwara took his time checked his watch.

"Oh, it won't be too long."

Fujiwara touched the tip of his jaw with his fingers and appeared to ponder the request. He glanced at Kaitani. "I'm meeting with somebody. Will this take more than ten or fifteen minutes?"

"It shouldn't."

His shoulders slumped in acquiescence. "Well, go on," he motioned.

"It's personal. Why don't we use one of the conference rooms?"

Good God, the look on his face said, as he strode off. Kaitani tagged along after him. On the second floor was a partitioned meeting room. The room was a kind of commons, used for greeting visitors or for impromptu conferences. The room was divided into eight cubicles, but at this time of day, they were the only ones there.

There was a small table and four chairs. Fujiwara sat down first, and Kaitani took a seat across from him. "I'd like to talk about the KASHA designs," Kaitani said, coming right to the point.

Fujiwara arched his eyebrows—eyebrows that, for a man, were so neat and trim that they gave Kaitani the creeps.

"I'm committed to the dragon design, no matter what. I'd like you to consider it again."

Fujiwara sat back in the chair and folded his arms. He stared patiently at Kaitani but said nothing. In the silence that followed, they both seemed to be holding their breaths. A sweet scent wafted by.

"You're apparently not a man who listens to reason. I already turned it down."

"But—"

"I had no intention of going with the dragon design from the start. Because you were so taken with it, I accepted it as a provisional proposal." Their eyes met. "I've considered this before, but I'm beginning to think that it might be time for you to leave the development team, Kaitani-kun."

The realization that Fujiwara didn't want or need him around felt as if a railroad spike had been driven into his chest. Almost as soon as Kaitani had gotten obsessed with the dragon design and had gone to town on it, Fujiwara branded him "useless."

"I brought you onto the team thinking you might find it a learning experience. Far from learning anything, you apparently don't even know what you don't know. Perhaps you need to spend some time at one of our smaller subsidiaries learning the ropes in sales and distribution. If that's acceptable with you, I'd be happy to make the arrangements."

Kaitani bit his lip in sheer frustration. Transferring him to a subsidiary under the guise of being "educated" was just an excuse. The long and short of it was, he was a nuisance, an obstacle, and his presence was no longer required, so Fujiwara wanted him gone.

"I'd prefer to stay on this team," Kaitani said in a strained voice.

"Teamwork is essential. You're just doing whatever you feel like. You won't be happy unless what you want gets center stage. But I want to see the money. I'm not saddling this company with significant losses based on your personal feelings."

"And how did you come to the conclusion that the design is not good, that it won't sell?"

"The risk is too high."

"Risk, risk, if all you think about is risk, you'll never do anything new or interesting."

Fujiwara sighed. "I'm not trying to do anything new or interesting. All that matters is what sells."

Talking with him was pointless, Kaitani thought. They were traveling parallel lines that would never cross. He clenched his hands tightly on his knees. "I happen to think the dragon design is fine. That's why you're definitely going to sign off on it."

Fujiwara laughed, his voice rising from a mutter to a growl. "As far as the KASHA product line is concerned, the final say belongs to me. Your opinion doesn't count." He glared at Kaitani's bowed head.

"Your heart doesn't seem to be in this job. I had hopes for you, but I apparently was mistaken. Your inability to comply with the decision-making process does not bode well for you. You have unfortunately forced me to this conclusion, but starting today, I'm asking you to step down from the KASHA team."

Fujiwara thought he'd delivered the last word, but Kaitani felt strangely invigorated. If he was getting kicked off the team no matter what, there was nothing to be afraid of. He took a deep breath and looked Fujiwara in the eyes. "So, your secret comes out, then."

Only an eyebrow twitched on Fujiwara's perfectly composed face.

"This business about not taking your shirt off because of the burns on your back, it's all a big lie."

Fujiwara smiled, but his cheeks stiffened. He brushed back his bangs with his right hand. "I have no idea what you're taking about."

Kaitani brought both fists down on the table with a bang! and leapt to his feet. "Don't play dumb with me! If you don't want the entire company to know you're missing a nut, you're going to okay the dragon design. If you don't, then I send an email to everybody in the company describing how you've only got one of a pair."

His voice echoed in the quiet meeting room. After a long silence, Fujiwara placed his elbows on the table and his chin in his hands. "If you wish to make a public announcement about my supposed physical shortcomings, then go right ahead. Email or whatever, do as you please."

Fujiwara's quiet tone of voice was suffused with contempt. Faced with such brimming confidence, the browbeaten Kaitani wondered, “And that'd be just peachy with you?”

“Doesn't matter one way or the other. I don't know who you heard it from, but there's nothing to these facts of yours.” He declared, “Even if I did have such defects, how would you prove that I did? Strip me and drag me down the halls?” Fujiwara sniffed. “You are so far beneath me, you could spread these unfounded rumors about all day and you couldn't dent my reputation. I've got the confidence of the people at the top that matter. You've got nothing. Whose side do you think they'll come down on? With you as the source of the lies, they'll conclude you're some lowlife hatching schemes to bring down his superior, and hate you for it.”

Kaitani hadn't expected this show of defiance. Even if he declared that Fujiwara was missing one of his balls, Fujiwara would be the one they believed. But this time, Kaitani really didn't give a damn. He had only one purpose in mind—approval of the dragon design. That was it.

“We're not talking about unfounded rumors. I've got irrefutable evidence.”

The pompous, sneering man knit his brows. “Evidence?”

“You said it yourself. No one's going to believe me, so it's put up or shut up. I'm talking about sending an attachment with that email, a perfectly composed photo of you from head to crotch.”

Fujiwara's mouth dropped open. “When did you take—” he started to say, his eyes widening as he remembered. “Yesterday, you mean—”

“That's right. While you were passed out drunk, I stripped you and took a few pictures. And I'm not talking about some cell phone snapshots, but honest-to-God porn with a real digital camera. Not the kind of photos you can talk your way out of.”

Fujiwara made a thin line with his lips and lowered his gaze. He wasn't biding his time waiting for Kaitani to make the next move. Fujiwara didn't have anything to say because he'd been backed into a corner. I win, Kaitani thought. He had the photographs, unshakeable evidence. There was no denying what he could see with his own two eyes.

Fujiwara finally raised his head and glared at him with such loathing that it sent shivers up Kaitani's back. No other human being had ever eyed him with such animosity. “What do you want?”

“What?” said Kaitani, leaning forward.

“Money? If it's money, name your price and I'll pay it. After that, I never want to see you again.”

The rage flared up from the pit of his stomach, making him tremble in anger. Kaitani was blackmailing Fujiwara because he wanted that design approved, the design he saw so much potential in. But right to his face, Fujiwara was turning this into a sordid affair over money. Fujiwara thought he could buy off Kaitani with a little cash, when Kaitani hadn't been talking about anything but getting the dragon design approved.

Fujiwara didn't understand him at all. Kaitani was laying his cards on the table, but Fujiwara wasn't even trying to see things from his perspective. So, he got belligerent instead.

"Okay. A billion yen."

After a moment of silence, Fujiwara's shoulders shook with laughter. "Let's not joke around. A hundred thousand, maybe 500 thousand. At tops, a cool million. You should be happy with that."

Kaitani quietly got up from the chair. "I'm not playing games here. If you won't pay, then I email those attachments."

He turned and walked out of the cubicle. Fujiwara grabbed him forcefully by the shoulders. "I said I'd pay!" he shouted, coming at him with a desperate, cornered look on his face.

Kaitani relished the image of this frantic figure before him. "I don't want your money," he said, jerking himself free.

"Where's the camera now? Here? At your apartment?"

Kaitani ignored him and headed down the hallway. Fujiwara chased after him. When Kaitani stopped in front of the elevators, Fujiwara loathsomely implored, "Listen to my side of the story!"

Just who the hell isn't listening? Kaitani wanted to scream at him. The elevator doors opened. Kaitani stepped in, and just as the doors closed, he shoved Fujiwara away. He stumbled backwards and crumpled to the floor, his hair disheveled, his normally cool countenance on the verge of tears.

The elevator doors shut. Kaitani returned to the

office and retrieved his satchel. He really didn't want to see that defeated face again. He avoided the elevators and ran down the stairs instead.

Chapter 11

It was past eight in the evening, and Kaitani was sitting in his apartment in a T-shirt and shorts, watching television and eating takeout. He'd been steaming mad on the train home from work, but now that a little time had passed, he was calming down.

He wasn't paying attention to the television. All he could think about is why his confrontation with Fujiwara had gone so badly. The conversation should have been simple and to-the-point. He wouldn't expose Fujiwara's genital deficiencies by emailing those photos around the company, and in exchange, Fujiwara would approve the dragon design. But the negotiation got sidetracked onto the irrelevant subject of money.

If Fujiwara had maintained his cool and said, "Go ahead. Email those photos and I'll fire you on the spot," Kaitani would have been left holding the bag. But Fujiwara had gone on lying and hiding from the truth. There was no denying how badly Fujiwara wanted to keep things under wraps. Kaitani could feel the desperation in the air. A normal man would have tried to laugh it off. Fujiwara couldn't even do that.

Being so handsome, trying so hard to put up a good front, Fujiwara couldn't joke about missing a nut. He couldn't laugh about it, but Kaitani was busting a gut behind his back over what a jackass Fujiwara was. Trashing that "man of ennui" image Fujiwara put so much effort into was practically satisfaction enough.

When Fujiwara brought up money as a negotiating point, Kaitani got so mad he seriously considered stopping at an Internet café on the way home and mailing off the photographs. But with a possible deal still in the works, he checked his emotions and resolved to carry on the war of nerves. His original objective of getting the dragon design approved hadn't been achieved.

The thought of meeting with the man face to face sickened him, but he had no choice but to battle Fujiwara again, with the photos as his sword.

The doorbell rang.

Kaitani glanced over his shoulder, wondering who could be stopping by at this time of night. The doorbell rang again. "Coming, coming," he grumbled to his impatient visitor. He slipped into a pair of sandals and opened the front door. He took one look at the face of the man standing there and gulped. It was the face of the man he'd shoved away from the elevator doors several hours ago. Fujiwara was still in his suit, likely having come straight from the company.

Kaitani tried closing the door, but Fujiwara got his shoe in between the door and the jamb. As Fujiwara moved forward, Kaitani took a step back.

The man's eyes were filled with melancholy. He looked about ready to do a swan dive off the roof of a tall building. "Sorry for the late hour," he said, "but I simply had to see you today. I'd rather not stand here talking like this. Could I come in?"

There was no way Kaitani was letting him into his apartment. "Here's fine," he said.

The crease deepened between Fujiwara's eyebrows. He looked highly irritated, but at the same time seemed on the verge of tears. "Anybody could be listening to us." He definitely didn't want to be perched there in the doorway talking about his single testicle.

"Yeah, I get it," Kaitani conceded.

Holding the briefcase he always brought to work in one hand, Fujiwara slowly removed his shoes. He came as far as the doorway between the kitchen/dining room and the six-tatami-mat bedroom and stopped there. He showed no inclination to advance any further.

"You know why I'm here, so I'll get right to the point. I want to buy those photos."

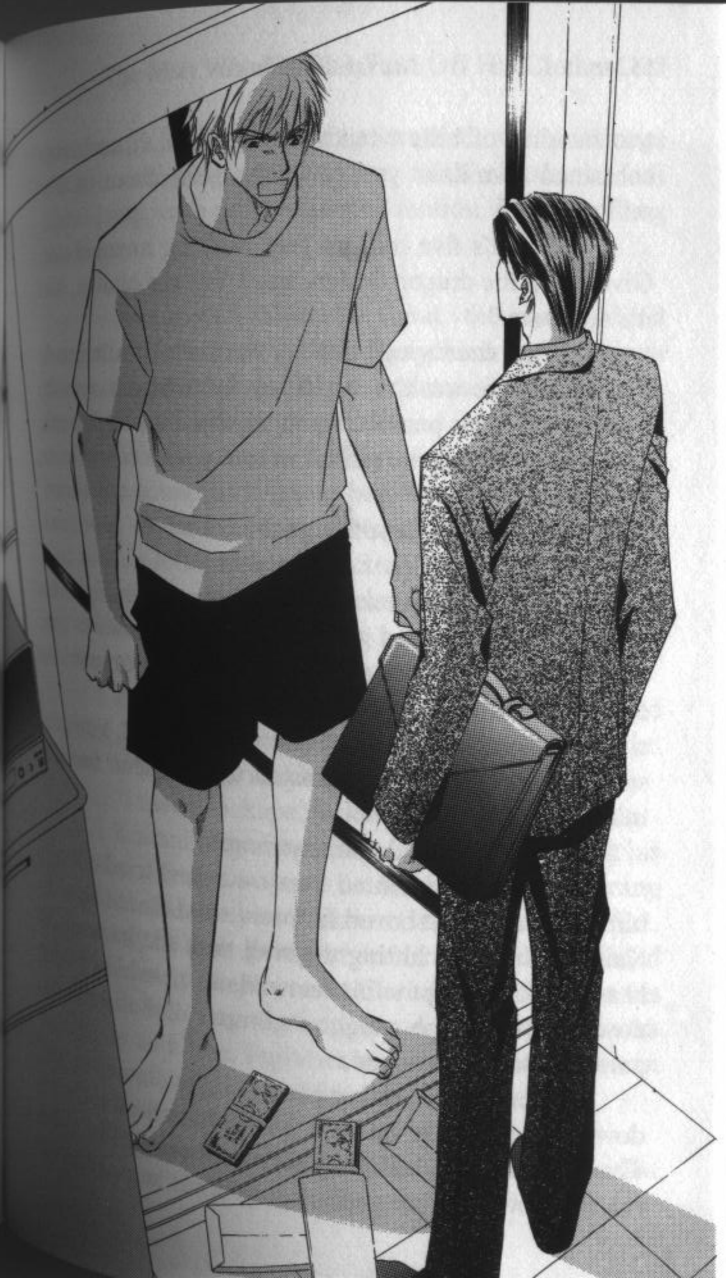
Still about the money, money, money! "It's not about the money!" Kaitani started to say, when Fujiwara took a white envelope from his briefcase and held it out to him. "One million yen."

Fujiwara removed the contents from the envelope, a stack of ten-thousand yen bills. A million yen in cash. He riffled through the bundle, the bills making a pleasing snapping sound. When Kaitani didn't take the money, Fujiwara growled, "What, even this isn't enough?" He extracted another envelope from his briefcase and held out the two million yen to Kaitani.

Two million yen— He shook off the tempting demons on his shoulders and threw the bundled bills to the floor. "This isn't about the money," he said again.

"Still not enough? You're a hard man hard to please."

Fujiwara tossed three more envelopes onto the



two bundles of bills already on the floor. If each also contained a million yen each, the total came to five million yen.

"That's five million yen. Nothing to sneeze at. Give up on the dragon design, hand over the photos, and it's all yours."

The siren's call echoed back and forth inside his head. There was the car he wanted to buy, money he had to send to his parents. Kaitani ground his back teeth. "All this is making me sick. I've told you over and over, it's not about the—!"

Fujiwara burst through the door.

"What—? What are you doing?"

Fujiwara squeezed past him, went straight for his computer desk, and grabbed the digital camera.

"Hey!" Kaitani yelled, as Fujiwara crammed the camera into his suit pocket. "Give that back!"

When Kaitani stuck out his right hand, Fujiwara smirked at him. "I just bought this camera for five million yen."

"Nobody sold you anything."

Fujiwara sprinted away. Kaitani tried to stop him, but Fujiwara shoved him aside and darted outside. Kaitani stumbled, hitting the wall with the back of his head, and then leapt to his feet and ran after him. Flying down the stairs, he caught a glimpse of Fujiwara and pursued him at top speed.

The camera in his pocket, Fujiwara ran swiftly down the sidewalk beneath the scattered streetlights. The distance gradually closed between them. After running several more yards, he suddenly stopped in the middle of a bridge. The bridge crossed over a drainage ditch overflowing with noxious slime. Under a dark street lamp, with an exaggerated motion, Fujiwara flung out his arm.

"Ah, shit!"

Along with Kaitani's shout, the camera he'd bought to commemorate his first paycheck arced through the air, disappeared mid-flight, and was followed by the sound of a dull splash.

Clinging to the railing of the bridge, Kaitani heard the sound of laughter behind him. The man was laughing so hard, his shoulders shook, like something had broken loose inside him. Staring down at the black surface of the water, Kaitani clenched the railing. "You are really starting to piss me off," he growled. "I'm sending those photos to everybody at the company."

Fujiwara's still trembling shoulders slumped slightly. "And how are you going to do that? Swim around in that muck looking for your camera?"

"I made backups, jackass."

Kaitani turned on his heels and jogged back his apartment. He was so mad he felt his head was going to explode. He was pissed down to the souls of his feet. Right now, he was going to send off the downloaded photos to every employee at Cavi. He got back to his apartment and was shutting the door when Fujiwara caught up with him. Fujiwara wedged his body between the door and the jamb and forced his way in.

"Get out."

"Please, reconsider." He clung to Kaitani shirttails as if begging for mercy.

Kaitani shook him off and shoved him away. Fujiwara sprawled in the genkon. Kaitani ignored him and booted up his computer.

"Please, stop."

Kaitani threw him off again, but Fujiwara kept coming at him. At this rate, far from sending the email, he couldn't even reach the keyboard. Fujiwara sprang at him. Kaitani delivered a sharp blow to his solar plexus. Fujiwara collapsed with a whimper. Kaitani jumped on his back, pinned his hands behind him and bound them with one of his neckties. He wrapped two belts around Fujiwara's ankles and cinched them tight. His arms immobilized, Fujiwara squirmed like a caterpillar. Kaitani gave the caterpillar a kick and dragged him over the bed. He pulled off Fujiwara's belt and secured his trussed-up feet to the bedpost.

Leaving Fujiwara to flounder there, Kaitani returned to his computer.

"Kaitani, I was wrong." Fujiwara's voice suddenly changed, took on more humble tones. "I got carried away. I was so desperate to get rid of those photographs. You understand, don't you? Do you have any idea how much damage a man can suffer having his physical shortcomings revealed?"

Kaitani didn't know anything about that.

"I'm begging you. Reconsider, won't you? I'll pay you as much as you want. Just don't send that email."

Kaitani had previously prepared an address list for the entire company. With a click, he designated it as the "recipient." Of the full nude shots that stood out with

real porn value, he attached the two that unmistakably illuminated Fujiwara's missing testicle.

"Kaitani! Please! Please don't do this!"

Kaitani finished preparing the email. His paused, his hand hovering over the keyboard, and thought it over. In his current state of mind, sending this email would be total payback. But still— He stood and walked away from the computer. He drew himself up to his full height and stood over the Fujiwara's squirming, wormlike body.

"All I have to do is press the Send button."

Fujiwara's face went white."

"This is your last chance. If you don't want me to send this email, then you approve the dragon design and R&D's lotion product."

"The lotion as well as the design?" The caterpillar deeply furrowed his brows.

"Say 'Yes' and I don't send it. Say 'No' and I do." Kaitani heaved a heavy sigh. "You've got ten seconds to answer." He started the countdown.

"You can't expect me to decide that fast," Fujiwara babbled.

"Three, two, one—"

Right up until the end, Fujiwara wouldn't say "Yea" or "Nay." Kaitani scooted up to the computer, and put his hand on the mouse.

"Wait a second. You're really going to send it? If you do that, I— I—"

Kaitani looked over his shoulder and grinned at Fujiwara, then turned his back to him. He raised his right hand.

"I get it. I get it. Stop. Yes, okay? Yes. Don't send that email."

It was a deal. Kaitani took his hand off the mouse and crouched down in front of the wormlike Fujiwara. "You said yes. You agreed. Now it's up to you to keep your end of the bargain. You don't, and the next time will be for real."

Fujiwara grit his teeth and fixed a fierce glare on Kaitani.

"As unacceptable as you said the dragon design was, all I had to do was threaten you with those photographs and you listened to everything I had to say, just like that. All your talk about corporate profits and sales might have the ring of truth, but in the end, you're the pathetic one.

Fujiwara's lips trembled. Despite all his fury, and after all this, his handsome face showed no more distress than this. Moaning spilled from his half-parted lips. He lay face down, curled into a ball to hide his face, and began to tremble. He was crying.

Serves him right, thought Kaitani, observing that his bullying of Fujiwara had driven the man to tears. At the same time, though, it made him feel a bit awkward. He had to get away from him for a while. He went to his narrow galley kitchen and opened the refrigerator. He got a beer and downed it right there. His throat was dry. He opened a second can and glanced over his shoulder. Fujiwara was still whimpering. Kaitani ought to untie him, but now wasn't the time to get up close and personal. He was the one who made him cry, after all. He had no idea what to say to him.

Doing his best to escape reality, he emptied the second beer and grabbed a third. The moaning waxed and waned like a car radio on the fritz, making Kaitani more and more depressed. Enough already! he cursed under his breath. Was this asshole going to go on crying forever?

He had pretty much drained his third beer when the doorbell rang. He staggered to his feet, thinking, What's with all the visitors today, and at this time of night? He made his way to the genkon, clinging to the wall, and opened the door.

Higashiyama stood in the threshold. "Sorry about the time," he said with a grin. "I was in the neighborhood so I decided to stop by." He was wearing his suit, which meant he was probably returning from work. "You said you'd found a place that served some great wine."

Imakura had recently introduced Kaitani to an impressive white wine. "Um, you came all the way over here for that?"

Higashiyama shrugged. "Like I said, I happened to be nearby. A lot's been happening on the project. I thought I'd buy you a drink and cheer you up."

Reformulating the lotion prototype must have been tough on Higashiyama, too. When Kaitani thought about him taking the time to see how he was doing, it warmed his heart, and almost brought him to tears.

"We're going through a lot of trial and error with our research," Higashiyama said cheerfully. He suddenly fell silent, a surprised look on his face. "What's this?"

The words, "Oh, damn" flashed through Kaitani's mind like a neon sign. All at once, he was drunk to the soles of his feet. In the small, one room apartment, Higashiyama could see straight from the genkon into the bedroom. And there, rolling around on the floor, his feet and hands bound, staring back at them, was Fujiwara.

"Help—help me."

Kaitani grabbed Higashiyama's right arm and dragged him outside the apartment. He stood with his back to the door, looking down, unable to think of a good excuse to explain away the situation.

"That was Section Chief Fujiwara in your room."

"Yeah, um, I know he said, 'Help me,' but that not because I'm beating him up or committing some kind of crime or anything—"

He didn't want to go into how he'd been threatening and blackmailing Fujiwara. Flustered, he couldn't look Higashiyama in the face. Higashiyama's sigh was painful to hear.

"In other words, this is consensual."

There was something disconcerting in that word, "consensual." Kaitani raised his eyes.

"If this is some kind of consensual play you've both agreed to, then I'm not going to say anything. I'm not in the position to meddle."

The thought flashed through his mind, What the hell did he mean by "play"? Still, if it was "consensual," then— Kaitani nodded vigorously.

Higashiyama smiled with great understanding. He scratched at the back of his head. "To be honest, I'm a bit surprised. I never would have imagined you and Section Chief Fujiwara having that kind of relationship. I mean, Section Chief Fujiwara is a handsome man with an ego to match, but I didn't get that vibe from him. Same goes for you. So, how long have you two been seeing each other?"

Seeing each other? If they were seeing each other, that meant they were dating, and that meant they liked each other, or even loved each other. Looking at the sniveling Fujiwara in his trussed-up, wormlike state, how could anybody think that? In the first place, using a word like "date" to refer to a male colleague was just weird.

Kaitani was a bit drunk and thought maybe Higashiyama was just messing around with him, but Higashiyama looked back at him with an almost scarily serious expression. "You been seeing each other long?"

"If you mean, um, when we . . . well, it's not really like that."

Higashiyama's face clouded. "So, this isn't a serious thing?"

"Not really," Kaitani hedged.

"I see," Higashiyama said with a sigh. "People all see these kinds of things differently, and as a rule I don't judge one way or another, but personally, I think it's best to have one partner. You don't have to worry about contracting a disease, and it's easier on the mind."

"That is true," Kaitani agreed, as a matter of course.

"Section Chief Fujiwara, huh? There's your job as well, and he's not an easy man to get along with." Higashiyama smiled wryly. Then he leaned in closer and whispered in Kaitani's ear, "Does the Section Chief get turned on getting tied up?"

Kaitani, in fact, had done the tying up, but if he denied it, Higashiyama might think that Kaitani was the one with the fetish. And he couldn't stand Higashiyama thinking that, on top of being gay, he was into BDSM, and even preferred being on bottom! So, Kaitani nodded affirmatively.

"Yeah, I thought so. Well, sorry for barging in your fun." Higashiyama clapped him on the shoulder. "I've held you up too long, already. So I'll be leaving. Past a certain point, even S&M tends to lose its thrill. We can talk at length some other time. Let's go to a nice restaurant."

With that, Higashiyama left, seemingly understanding the situation Kaitani was in. Kaitani patted his chest in relief. However, he just couldn't believe that Higashiyama had concluded he was into gay S&M. Thinking that he'd clear everything up the next time they met, he returned to the bedroom. There, the caterpillar man glared daggers at him.

"So you planned all this with Higashiyama from R&D?" His voice roiled up from the depths.

"Oh, I did this all on my own. He had nothing to do with it."

"You expect me to buy that? If he had nothing to do with it, then why didn't he help me when he saw me all tied up like this?"

"Because he thought we were playing."

"Playing?" Perplexed, Fujiwara tilted his head to the side.

"Yeah, he thought we getting our rocks off with some gay bondage S&M."

Fujiwara's face went as red as a boiled lobster. "You go get Higashiyama and tell him the truth, right now! I'm not gay! I'm not into bondage!"

"Don't be ridiculous. I told you, he doesn't have anything to do with this."

His mouth frozen half open, Fujiwara began to shake. "What…are we going to do if he goes and tells everybody?"

"He's not that kind of guy."

"There's no way you can vouch for a person's character so easily. If he's friends with a bottom-feeding sleazebag like you, I have no doubts what he's really like."

Kaitani couldn't help being reduced to behaving like a bottom-feeding sleazebag, but he couldn't let Fujiwara lump Higashiyama together with him like that. "Hey, don't say bad things about Higashiyama-san."

"If you don't want me to speak ill of your friend, then you'd better change your attitude toward me. Our business is done here. Hurry up and untie me."

The trussed-up caterpillar had until a few minutes ago had been sobbing like a baby. Now-defiant, he was like another person. He was back to being good old Section Chief Fujiwara.

"Why the hell should I? Huh?" Kaitani asked, staring down at him and contemptuously jutting out his chin.

"Why? Why won't you let me go?"

Kaitani deeply furrowed his brow at the snapping, snarling dog before him. He sniffed. "Because I can't stand you, that's why."

"What? What's that got to do with it? Let me go!" the bastard demanded.

Kaitani ignored him and turned on the television. He picked up half-eaten takeout. He completely ignored the worm and made a show of resuming his daily routine. He heard a jarring sound, the worm trying with all his might to free his hands and legs. But after a while, that faded away, too.

"How vulgar," Fujiwara grumbled. Without thinking, Kaitani looked at him. Fujiwara was scowling at the television. "Anybody who'd watch such base entertainment would obviously have no problem sinking to something so low."

Kaitani was watching a variety show. A well-known "idol" was performing on stage. Though he wouldn't exactly call the program "high-brow," it wasn't trashy enough to be called "vulgar."

"What not spent your time studying instead of watching crap like that? But you don't even know how much you need to learn, do you?"

At least let me watch a show I like while I'm eating dinner! Kaitani thought to himself. Fujiwara was still trying to browbeat him. It pissed him off. He said, his voice dripping with sarcasm, "She's been in commercials recently. Pretty cute, huh? Oh, I'm sorry. When you're missing one, I guess that means you're only half as interested in girls, huh?"

Fujiwara's face again turned red. "That has nothing to do with it! I'm in a completely different league than you!"

Kaitani almost coughed up his beer. The slender, handsome man of ennui didn't bring to mind strong images of masculinity.

"I am a man of principle. I have no interest in whatever exaggerated illusions the media gins up. Moreover, I believe it is healthiest to associate with women most similar to oneself."

"I wouldn't call going through women one after the other the way you do healthy."

Fujiwara gave him a disappointed look. "I remain serious about the women I date on a daily basis. More than simply going out with a woman, I must determine whether she will be my lifetime companion. The reason I have been with so many women is because I have thus far concluded that none of them have yet risen to my ideal of a partner."

Listening to what he was saying and taking it at face value, Kaitani shook his head vigorously. "Admit it, you're just picking up girls to have sex with them."

"Sex comprises an important part of life. But I don't date teenagers. If I did, that would be the obvious conclusion." He wasn't saying anything Kaitani couldn't understand, but he couldn't come up with the words to counter the colorful life that Fujiwara led. Fujiwara sniffed, "I take it you haven't had many romantic relationships in your life."

The remark hit painfully close to the bone. He'd only had two steady girlfriends in his entire life.

During college, he'd hooked up with the manager of the baseball team. And then, during his second year on the job, he'd dated a girl he'd met at a mixer. It'd only lasted six months. She was a pretty low-key type and things between them stagnated and at some point fell apart of their own accord.

"You're jealous of me because of all the women I've had. That's hardly surprising. Women will go out of their way to avoid a classless slob like you."

"Stuck-up snobs like you make me sick."

Fujiwara narrowed his eyes. "Fine if they do. Being hated by other men is no skin off my back. If you envy me that much, then perhaps I should instruct you on the art of picking up women."

Kaitani turned his back to Fujiwara and turned up the volume on the television. He liked this show, but after hearing it dissed, he couldn't maintain his interest. Nevertheless, the thought again came to him that Fujiwara really did know how to talk about his emotions. There was no denying the man's barbed tongue, but he still projected that image of "cool," was still the "man of ennui," still only spoke when he had something to say. Higashiyama was probably right when he'd said that if you didn't come into actual contact with somebody, you'd never see the real person.

The television program ended about the same time he finished the takeout. The nightly news came on.

"Are you going to untie my hands anytime soon?"

Fujiwara rolled on his stomach. His hands were bound behind his back. He rubbed his tied wrists

together. When Kaitani went over to Fujiwara, with the intent of releasing him, the name of a famous fashion model he liked was announced on the television. Words like "engagement" and "pregnancy" floated past his ears.

"Hurry up."

"Be quiet."

His gaze was rooted on the television screen. Some minor comedian was interviewing her.

"Give me a break! How long do you intent to make me grovel on this filthy floor of yours?"

Fujiwara's voice was really rubbing him the wrong way. His face was scrunched up like he'd eaten something rotten. So, my floor is that dirty, huh? Kaitani thought. He was seized with feelings of malice.

"What? What are you laughing at?"

Kaitani didn't know he was laughing until Fujiwara asked him.

"I'm not letting you go."

"Why?

"Because you said my floor was filthy."

"I'm not joking!" shouted Fujiwara. "Let me go!"

Kaitani turned his back. No matter what Fujiwara said, Kaitani ignored him. He soon grew quiet. Then his voice took on more urgent tones.

"Untie me. If you don't, I'm going to go right here."

Kaitani spun around and gulped. Fujiwara wasn't kidding. His face was white from the strain. Kaitani snatched the plastic shopping bag he'd brought the takeout home in and stuck it beneath his chin.

“Not that!” Fujiwara screamed at him.

“What, then? I don’t care how dirty my floor is, I sure as hell don’t want you upchucking on it.”

“I’m not going to throw up! Get me to the toilet!”

“When you say the toilet—”

“God, I gotta piss!”

With a cry approaching a wail, Kaitani removed the two belts from around Fujiwara’s ankles. As soon as he was free, Fujiwara scurried to the toilet. But with his hands still bound, he couldn’t open the door.

“Hurry up and untie my hands!”

He’d only lasted this long twisting and contorting his body like an earthworm. When Kaitani tried to undo the necktie binding his hands behind his back, he couldn’t loosen the knot. His frantic state of mind only made things worse.

“Faster! Faster!”

The lower half of Fujiwara’s body was trembling, his eyes rolled back in their sockets. Realizing that they had no more time to waste, Kaitani threw open the bathroom door, shoved Fujiwara inside, unzipped his trousers, took a deep breath, and shoved his hand inside.

“What are you doing?”

“I can’t undo it. So I’m lending you a hand. This time only.”

“I don’t need your help. Just let me go!”

“I told you, I can’t undo the knot. Hey, I’m not thrilled about touching another guy’s prick, either.”

He found it and pulled it out.

“God almighty, this is gross,” shouted Fujiwara, as the firehouse went off. After the initial burst, the sound of pouring water went on for a long time. When the stream was finally exhausted, as he always did, Kaitani jiggled it up and down a few times and then stuffed it back inside his shorts, Fujiwara shrieked.

“What now?”

“You didn’t dry it off!”

“Dry it off?”

“Whenever I urinate, I always wipe off the tip. If you don’t, any remaining moisture will dampen your undershorts.

“Huh?” said Kaitani, tilting his head to the side. “Then wash your underwear. What’s the problem?”

“This is not a problem to be settled with a washing machine.”

To stop all the squawking in his ear, he had no choice but to take it out again. Grasping it at the base, he swung it back and forth.

“Don’t swing it!” Fujiwara yelled, so Kaitani unrolled a wad of toilet paper and wiped him off. “That hurts!” Fujiwara said, jerking his waist back. “Think about what you’re handling! Treat it with a bit more care.”

“Yeah, but I don’t really care how I treat this one.”

Having wiped him off the way he wished and let go of him, Fujiwara looked pretty silly, hanging there out of his black trousers.

“Put it back,” Fujiwara growled.

Kaitani ignored him and left the toilet. With everything hanging out, lolling back and forth, Fujiwara chased after him. “Put it back in my underwear. And you haven’t washed your hands, have you? I can’t believe how dirty you are.”

Kaitani sat on the bed. He bowed his head and let out a big sigh.

“So, I got that dirty touching your prick just once, huh?”

Having lent particular stress to your prick, Fujiwara’s face grew red with rage. “That’s not the issue.”

Kaitani stood up and rubbed his right hand against the front of Fujiwara’s shirt. “There. All cleaned off. Okay?”

Fujiwara stood there stock still, and then began to tremble. “Don’t be such a childish bully.”

No matter what Kaitani did, Fujiwara was going throw a hissy fit. It got depressing listening to the whining man, so Kaitani turned him around and went to work on the necktie. He thought undoing the knot would take a while, but in a disappointingly short amount of time, he’d loosened the necktie.

As soon as he was free, Fujiwara put everything back where it belonged. He washed his hands in the kitchen sink. He returned to the bedroom, grabbed his briefcase, and without a word, without a glance in Kaitani’s direction, and left.

In the suddenly quiet room, Kaitani heaved a sigh. In the space of an hour, way too much had happened. He was exhausted.

“Give me a break,” he muttered.

“Unbelievable.”

His eyes fell on the five million yen Fujiwara had brought as his bargaining chips, still lying on the floor.

Chapter 12

The day after the skirmish with Fujiwara over the digital camera, Kaitani got an email from Higashiyama saying that if Kaitani was free tonight, "Let's go out for a drink."

Kaitani wanted to clear up any misunderstandings about this gay S&M business, so he readily replied, "Let's do it."

They met in front of the station at 7:00 P.M. Kaitani thought they'd be going to the familiar Kemuri. Instead, Higashiyama said, "How about we try a different place?"

They got into a taxi and rode to a station Kaitani had never been to before. The taxi stopped at the entranceway to the shopping and business district. After walking a few dozen yards, Higashiyama came to a simple-looking bar. The nameplate on the door said, "Belzard S."

"It's a bar, but they'll cook up the right kind of meal if you ask."

"Huh," said Kaitani, and followed Higashiyama inside the bar.

The entranceway was narrow, but the interior was spacious. The decor had a handsome old-fashioned American feel. A big jukebox sat in the corner. There was a distinct atmosphere about the place, but only two other men were present.

"Oh, oh, is that Yuichi?"

The macho behind the counter clasped his hands together in a girlish manner. He was buff and muscular down to his hair, but spoke in such mincing tones. Cold sweat beaded and ran down Kaitani's back.

"Wow, weird, you bringing somebody with you. And isn't he a cute one." The macho gave him a wink.

"Um, thanks," said Kaitani, averting his eyes and lowering his head.

When they sat at the counter, the macho sidled up to them. "Don't tell me you're stepping out on Takashi-chan with this boy! Oh, I'm going to tell!"

A vexed look came to Higashiyama's face. He smiled wryly. "No, I'm not. Kaitani works in the Sales Promotion department at Cavi. Right now, we're both on the same project. He knows Imakura, too."

"He does?" The macho said, with a rising intonation.

"Kaitani, this is Tomoharu, a friend of mine. He's the proprietor."

"Come by anytime!" said Tomoharu, holding out his business card. According to that pathetic business tradition, Kaitani reflexively took a business card case from his breast pocket and handed it to him.

"Name's Kaitani. Higashiyama's been a great help to me."

As he watched the Tomoharu cheerfully examining his business card, Kaitani felt a tinge of unease, but he chose not to dwell on it.

Higashiyama said, "How about you whip up something that'll stick to the ribs?"

"Yes, yes," Tomoharu replied, in an even higher key, and disappeared into the back.

Higashiyama mused, "This morning, I got a communication from Section Chief Fujiwara saying that the texture of the 004 lotion formulation was fine. As opposed to it as he was, he suddenly changed his mind. Everybody's talking about it. I had to wonder if perhaps you put in a good word for us."

Not so much "putting in a good word" as "twisted his arm behind his back," but Kaitani wasn't about to explain the difference. He already knew how sordid it sounded, and didn't want to invite the condemnation. The texture of the lotion was great. Even if none of this had happened, the lotion deserved to go to market, so he'd pushed it along with the dragon design. He'd left Higashiyama out of the loop by choice, and didn't want him to make too much of things as they stood.

"Not at all. I suspect that decision was, well, the result of him rethinking things. I didn't have anything to do with it."

"I wonder."

Kaitani was about to reiterate what he just said when Tomoharu returned with the food. "Sorry about the wait," he said with a smile, placing two plates down on the counter. "Summer greens served on chilled pasta. My original recipe. It's so delicious."

Kaitani was hungry and dug in with relish. The conversation came to a halt. Higashiyama didn't press the matter further, and picked up his fork. As they ate, the place gradually filled with people, all of them were men. To make matters worse, with all these men embracing each other, holding hands and cuddling together, the place was jumping with a weird vibe. This must be a gay bar, Kaitani thought, but he wasn't about to ask Higashiyama to confirm this suspicion.

The strange atmosphere set his teeth on edge. He shifted around on the barstool while Higashiyama seemed perfectly at-home. He said, "I didn't think you swung this way, Kaitani."

Swung what way? Kaitani turned to respond and saw two men there kissing deeply.

"Hey, you look uptight." Higashiyama patted him on the shoulder. "It's okay. This place has a great clientele. Nobody's going start a fight if you give him the brush-off. And if somebody gets in your face, talk to Tomoharu and he'll take care of it."

Give him the brush-off— Easy to say, but the sumo-sized bloke next to him had been giving him the eye for a while now, and it was creeping him out.

"When I found out that you and the Section Chief were on the same wavelength, to be honest, I was thrilled. I was born gay, too."

"Eh?"

Their eyes met and Higashiyama grinned.

"You are, ah, I mean—" Kaitani looked at him, stunned. The shock of the revelation was like getting hit by a gale-force wind. When he'd seen the Section Chief all trussed up and immediately concluded it was gay S&M play, Kaitani simply put it down to Higashiyama been a broad-minded type of guy. He'd never considered that Higashiyama might be gay as well. He was tall, good-looking, a nice guy, yet now that Kaitani thought about it, he hardly talked about women, nor had Kaitani heard any rumors about him having a woman.

"To tell the truth, Imakura-san is my partner."

"When—when you say partner, you mean, in fact—"

My lover, Higashiyama confessed, looking a bit abashed.

Kaitani had only begun to digest the fact that Higashiyama was gay. Discovering that Imakura was, too, gave him the sense of peeking under the curtain at some inscrutable aspect of society. He pictured Imakura in his mind's eyes, the kind and slightly-built apprentice sommelier. Imakura truly was cute and pretty for a man, but Kaitani didn't have any desire to kiss him or sleep with him. He tried imagining Imakura naked, but he just couldn't do it. And while he couldn't begin to understand what it meant to have a sexual attraction for a member of the same sex, he did like Higashiyama and Imakura. Those feelings hadn't changed.

Tomoharu leaned across the counter and inserted himself into the conversation. "This one's the real jealous type. The last time he brought Takashi-chan by, oh, it was awful. Yuichi wouldn't let Takashi-chan from his side for a second!"

Kaitani had not idea had long Tomoharu had been standing there. Higashiyama said, "You talk too much, sometimes."

"You're such a meanie," Tomoharu squirmed.

Kaitani could begin to wrap his head around Higashiyama and Imakura being gay, but it was going to take some time getting used to this macho queen.

"But your lover is Section Chief Fujiwara," Higashiyama muttered, returning to the main subject.

"It's, uh, very complicated. I definitely wouldn't describe our relationship as a romantic one," Kaitani stated firmly.

Higashiyama blinked several times. "Huh!" he said, resting his chin in his right hand. "I didn't think you were the type to go out with anybody just for the hell of it, so I concluded he must be your lover."

Higashiyama was right about that. Kaitani didn't date anybody just for the hell of it. Being misunderstood like this was sheer torment. "Ha, ha," he laughed thinly.

Tomoharu leaned forward and asked with great interest, "Oh, Kaitani-chan, does Yuichi know your partner, too?"

"Ah, he's quite the beauty, the type that gets looks from men who aren't gay."

"So Kaitani-chan likes the pretty boys."

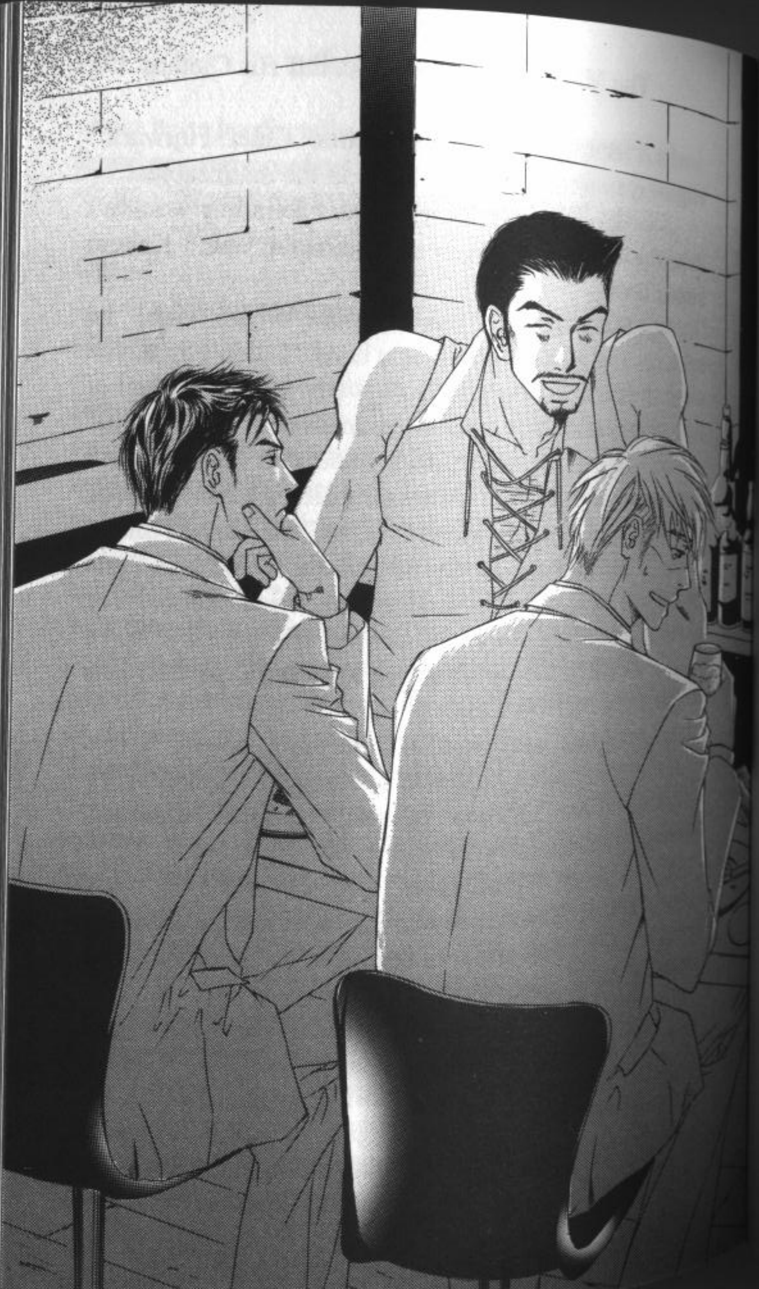
"Pretty boys? What do you mean by that?"

"What do I mean by what?" queried Tomoharu, hiking up an eyebrow.

"Sorry. I don't get it."

"It means the same thing to women as it does to men. Could I perhaps conclude that you just came out? When did you realize you were gay?"

He hadn't realized it ever. He wasn't gay. But the conversation having progressed this far, and Higashiyama having confessed his sexual identity, it'd be tough to insist he wasn't gay. Besides, it allowed him to explain away the "bondage play" business with Fujiwara. If Kaitani said he was straight, he'd have to



come up with another reason, and he'd tie himself up in knots explaining why he'd want to tie anybody else in knots.

There was no hope of clearing up the confusion about being into gay S&M. While they talked, and while trying to think of a way out of this mess, Kaitani keenly realized how poorly he understood himself.

"It was quite recently," he mumbled.

"Oh, I don't believe it, taking such a long time to find your way out of the closet, But that's nothing to be ashamed about. Friends of mine haven't figured it out until they were in their sixties! You like pretty boys. For the record, I go for the blue-collar types. Yuichi's a sucker for that cherubic look."

Kaitani suddenly found himself in something of a daze, trying to grasp the depth and breadth of the gay world.

"Oh, there are all kinds: gays into old guys, gays into fat guys, gays into bald guys, gays into lesbian play. And then you've got gays who like to mix and match, like fat, bald guys."

In the face of such profound distinctions, Kaitani could only nod and say, "Is that so?"

"I happen to like the blue-collar type, but I've recently thought that a sportsman might be nice, too. You play sports, don't you, Kaitani-chan?"

"How did you know?"

Tomoharu shrugged. "You're slender, but your upper body and shoulders are pretty muscular. You've got a tight butt, as well. Still, your musculature is a bit unbalanced between the left and right sides of your body. You must do a sport that exercises the shoulders and the hips—like baseball."

"That's right. I used to play baseball."

"Bingo!" said Tomoharu. But the next thing he said was completely unexpected. "Don't take is personally, Kaitani-chan, but I don't much care for pretty boys. So many of them are so stuck up about their looks, so high-handed with everybody."

Kaitani had to agree with "high-handed" part. He said, "That's true. When it comes to his own good looks, he is a total narcissist."

"Like I said, the beautiful ones all have egos to match. It turns me off." Tomoharu hugged his own brawny shoulders and pretended to shiver in disgust.

Thinking about which one of them turned him off the most, Kaitani gulped.

"A beautiful boy and a narcissist—if he's into bondage, he must be the M in S&M, don't you think?" Higashiyama muttered.

Tomoharu snapped at the bait, his eyes shining. "Who's this M?"

"The other day, I went over the Kaitani's place, his partner was tied up and rolling around on the floor. They looked like they were in the middle of something."

"It means you were a big nuisance. Or, rather, the game was being watched while being abused. Since Kaitani is only a beginner, taking a pretty boy narcissist as a lover all-at-once, and an M to boot, would be an awfully high hurdle to surmount."

The conversation had taken off in an unexpected direction, but he didn't know how to get things back on track. All Kaitani could manage was some forced laughter.

"And how are things downstairs?" Tomoharu asked in a whisper.

"D-Downstairs?"

Tomoharu wagged his forefinger back and forth. "Tsk, tsk, don't play innocent with me. How is sex with your pretty boy Mr. M? Can he get it up when he's not tied up?

"Sex, well—um—that kind of—"

Sex with Fujiwara—sex with a man who emotionally was his complete opposite. He couldn't begin to imagine it—no, he didn't want to imagine it, and so he stopped his brain from even processing the thought. When he mumbled, hemmed and hawed, Higashiyama inclined his head.

"I thought you were on top, but perhaps you prefer Section Chief Fujiwara giving you the business?"

"By on top, you mean playing the male role, right?"

Tomoharu hit the counter top with a bang! "Goodness gracious, but you're trying my patience, Kaitani-chan. Ram or ewe, which is it? C'mon, out with it!"

When Tomoharu leaned forward to press him further, Kaitani hurriedly squeaked out, "Ram!"

Higashiyama's shoulders shook with laughter. "You are a curious one. How's Section Chief Fujiwara doing? From what I could see, it looked like pretty great sex."

"When it comes to sex, we're, um, not at the stage where we can talk about it." Delivering this anticlimax, he bowed his head.

"Is that so?" they somehow seemed to understand.

"So Section Chief Fujiwara is the type that likes to play around, but stops short of sex."

This was a misunderstanding Kaitani was happy to let stand. He energetically nodded.

"My, but what a rude fellow! It's unforgivable, only wishing to be serviced and taking a rain check on the fun parts. How long do you think this type of thing is going to go on?" Tomoharu put his hands on his hips and let out a little huff of indignation.

"But that just may be the type he is. I get the feeling he's fully aware of how alluring he is."

"Yuichi, you're not defending this Mr. M, are you?" At some point, Tomoharu had begun referring to Fujiwara as "Mr. M." He said, "I can't abide men who put on airs like that. But I guess if Kaitani-chan enjoys putting out without getting any in return— Still, it is so unforgivable!"

Tomoharu appeared to sink into deep contemplation. Then he clapped his hands and cried out, "That's it! Next week, I'm throwing an all-night dance party. That's what we call it, but it's really a mixer for men. You've got to invite your Mr. M to the party. I'll get him good and drunk, and when he's three sheets to the wind, just give him a taste of his own medicine, mano-a-mano. Carry it off once, and he's all yours!"

The conversation had veered off in an alarming direction that Kaitani wasn't willing to head in. "Um, I don't think I want to go that far."

When he reservedly declined, Tomoharu gaped at him. "What are you saying? You can't let this go on without your Mr. M getting himself a good thrashing for once. Gird up your loins and overthrow the status quo! He who hesitates is lost! Be a real man!"

Tomoharu held the business card Kaitani had given him between his index and middle fingers and grinned. "I don't have a boyfriend right now and I'm looking. I've gotten a bit weary of the macho scene, and have been thinking that a sportsman type might be nice for a change. If you don't come to my party, I'm going to make little old shilly-shallying Kaitani-chan my sweetheart if it's the last thing I do."

Tomoharu blew him a kiss that stung. The barest hint in the air of his true intentions was more than a little frightening. Of course, there was no way Kaitani could turn him down.

Chapter 13

The day after visiting Belzard S., Kaitani got an email from Tomoharu. The email included pleasantries like, "Yesterday was fun. Please come again! Good luck at your job." Except that he sent Kaitani five emails in one day. Kaitani's only thought was that Tomoharu was going all-out, or he must have a lot of time on his hands. However, the email that arrived the next day had heart emoticons all over the place.

And then, the day after that, on his way home from work, Kaitani ran into him at the station. Tomoharu didn't talk in that girlish manner and didn't openly flirt with him. At a glance, he just looked like a really buff guy. Kaitani was hungry, so they went to a bar and had a drink. Although they sat across from each other, he got the feeling that their eyes were meeting more than they should, and he found it hard to relax.

Late that night, he got an unsettling email from Higashiyama: "I've been getting a lot of messages from Tomoharu recently. True for you, too?"

Kaitani called him right back. According to Higashiyama, Tomoharu had let it be known around his establishment that if Kaitani didn't bring Mr. M to the dance party, Tomoharu would immediately and henceforth spare no effort to make Kaitani his!

Kaitani immediately emailed Tomoharu to the effect that, "I'm in love with Mr. M. Right now, I'm not

thinking about anybody else."

Tomoharu soon replied, "Oh, damn. I'm getting the idea that a guy like me just isn't your cup of tea. Don't worry. Please come to the party and have a good time."

Unable to decide whether not to go to the dance party, Kaitani talked it over with Higashiyama.

As Kaitani explained his plight, Higashiyama remained silent. Then he said, "I don't think he's forcing you to attend the party, but take Tomoharu's feelings into consideration. He strikes me as unusually serious. I think the reason he's not giving up, even when he knows you already have a partner, is because you don't seem to be taking the relationship very seriously. If you demonstrated how well you and the Section Chief were getting on, I think he'd move on. Having just taken you to the bar, I don't want to cause any problems, but how about you at least show up once with Fujiwara? I'd really owe you one."

His best friend was asking him, and Kaitani actually felt like it'd be the right thing to do. If he could pull it off, that is. There was just one big problem: getting Fujiwara to come along.

The average boss, even if he was having an affair with a subordinate, wasn't going to escort him to a gay bar because some macho gay had his eyes on him and the only way to discourage the bloke was to pretend he and his boss were lovers. On top of that, the appalling notions of "blackmailer" and "blackmailee" were invariably attached to their interactions.

Even if Kaitani invited Fujiwara, he knew there was no way he'd agree, so he didn't say anything. In the midst of his worry and anguish, he got an email from Tomoharu littered with cutesy emoticons. It made him want to tear his hair out.

On the day of the party, if worse came to worse, Kaitani considered going with the old "My mom suddenly took a turn for the worse" standby. That afternoon, an email arrived from Tomoharu saying, "I'm not letting you get away with canceling at the last minute on account of your mother's poor health. Try it, and I'll eat you up on the way home from work like what the wolf did to Little Red Riding Hood's grandma. Come alone if you have to."

Checkmate.

Almost at the end of the workday, around five o'clock, he received the clinching email. "Kaitani-chan, the time for proving your manhood draws nigh!" He deleted it a second later.

At five-thirty, Fujiwara began straightening up his desk. Now or never, Kaitani said himself, and got up from his chair.

"Section Chief Fujiwara."

Fujiwara raised his head. His face looked devoid of emotion. Precisely one week had passed since had Fujiwara thrown the five million yen at him. The next day, Kaitani had returned it to him along with some official paperwork. Fujiwara said nothing about the returned money.

R&D received the go-ahead for the second iteration of the Kasha lotion, but no formal announcement had been made about the design. The

subject would likely be covered at the next conference. In the meantime, progress on the Kasha line seemed to have stalled. Aside from this Kasha business, Kaitani would not have much to do with Fujiwara. There simply weren't that many occasions for them to meet face-to-face. In fact, before the "Kasha incident," Kaitani could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times they'd actually spoken to each other.

"If you don't mind, I would like a few minutes of your time."

Fujiwara's impassive eyes, like a Noh mask, narrowed with displeasure. "What is this about?"

"I'm sorry, but perhaps we could speak somewhere else? It won't take long."

"If it won't take long, then we can speak here."

There were still about ten people left in the office. He didn't want anybody else hearing him ask for this particular kind of favor. He lowered his voice to a whisper. "I'd like you to come to a bar a friend of mine runs. I'd appreciate it."

"A bar?" Fujiwara said, quizzically tilting his head to the side.

"They're throwing an all-nighter. But showing up for an hour would be fine."

An uncomfortable silence followed. Kaitani swallowed hard. It sounded like a roaring gargle in his ears.

"I don't know," Fujiwara said under his breath. "Considering my feelings toward you, which you cannot fail to be cognizant of, I can't begin to imagine why you'd so blandly ask me out on some double-date."

Kaitani explained that the party was a kind of mixer, a socializing get-together. He wasn't exactly lying. He just left out the part about it being about guys hitting on other guys, not on girls.

"It's important that you come this time."

"Then tell my why it is so important. You think having me around will help you pick up women?"

They wouldn't get anywhere without him telling the truth, but he doubted Fujiwara would agree if he did. Kaitani prepared himself for the worse. "The other day, I went to a bar with Higashiyama that a friend of his owns. Your name came up during the conversation, and I wasn't able to dissuade them that we weren't a gay couple into S&M."

Kaitani said the last part as softly as he could, but as soon as the words left his mouth, Fujiwara's face went white as a sheet. He cast his eyes around the room, grabbed Kaitani by the arm, and dragged him out of the office. Fujiwara took him to a rarely-used office supplies room next to the Sales Planning & Promotion department. The windowless room was lined with six big shelves. The aisles weren't wide enough to even fit two people abreast.

Fujiwara hissed, "Have you taken leave of your senses, bringing up a subject like that in public? How can you calmly use such compromising language?" He clearly had no desire to even mention a term like "S&M."

"That's why I wanted to have the conversation someplace else. You're the one who said to tell you right there at your desk.

Fujiwara pressed his hands against his temples. He was quiet for a moment, and then he blurted out, "What is it you want? Out with it."

"While we were at the bar, well, the subject of sex came up. I denied that we were sleeping together, but then the bar owner started saying how it was pretty strange that we were lovers but weren't sleeping together. Bringing you to this dance party would help move the relationship along, or so he said."

Fujiwara's brow furrowed and the corners of his mouth began to tremble. It was scary, the way his anger grew and his temper flared, but Kaitani pressed on. "I don't care about the dance party itself, but the owner of the bar—he, um, it seems he's taken a shine to me. He announced himself in the running to win me as his lover. The problem is I'm not gay. But if you came to the bar just once, and told him you were my boyfriend, I've got to believe he'd give up on the idea."

Fujiwara didn't reply in anyway. The silence continued. Finally, his thin lips parted. "So, you want me to show up there and pretend I'm gay?"

"Yeah, well, that's the gist of it."

Kaitani heard a loud bang! and felt a draft between his legs. He glanced down and his gonads shrunk right up. One of Fujiwara's very expensive shoes had grazed his groin and collided with the door behind him.

"Bugger off, asshole." The expletives erupted from Fujiwara's beautiful lips, words Kaitani had never heard him speak before. "How can you imagine that I would wish to associate with you in any way? I wouldn't dream of lowering myself to the level of a little shit like you."

"Be that as it may, but at this point, I'd rather not tell the truth."

"Go ahead. Tell them that the only relationship between the two of us is that of superior and subordinate.

Kaitani spread his hands apart. "Well then, how do I explain the whole tying-up business?"

"You were the one who took the low road and assaulted me. Go ahead and tell them that."

Fujiwara was making him out to be the bad guy. "Maybe so," Kaitani shouted back, jabbing his finger at him. "I took the low road, but weren't you the one who threw my digital camera in the river?"

Fujiwara sniffed and said with a smile, "You took those pictures and were blackmailing me. You had it coming."

So, this was all about payback. Kaitani ground his teeth. "It was because you wouldn't approve the dragon design. Despite the marketing research, despite the good opinions of everybody else, you alone rejected it without so much as a second thought."

"I still haven't approved it."

Back and forth it went. Even when the conversation died, they glared and growled at each other like two junkyard dogs. The first one to give in and shift his gaze was Fujiwara.

"I don't have any more time to talk to you. Get out of the way."

Kaitani ignored him and planted himself in front of the door. Fujiwara forcefully grabbed him by the shoulders, pushed him against the shelves, and then nonchalantly reached for the doorknob.

"Oh, I get it now," Kaitani said, raising his voice loud enough to be heard outside the room. Fujiwara looked over his shoulder at him. "I'll tell the truth. How I took a picture of you and your one nut, and how I tied you up when you got pissed off at me. Yes, the truth is always best."

Fujiwara's face stiffened. But he smiled just the same. "Do as you please. I have nothing to fear from what you say to total strangers."

In fact, nobody at the bar had the slightest idea who Fujiwara was. They'd smile and shake their heads—that would be the extent of their reactions. Kaitani clenched his fists. He didn't want to resort to it, but Fujiwara wasn't leaving him any choice in the matter.

"Quit bitching and come with me. If you don't, I'll email those photos to everybody at Cavi."

Fujiwara's aloof countenance faltered and his eyes spun in their sockets. "We came to an understanding regards the design and the texture of the lotion. Now you're unilaterally changing the terms of the agreement. How degraded can you get?"

Kaitani bit his lip. Like Fujiwara said, he was reneging on their agreement, but he couldn't back down now. "Consider it an option on the deal."

"What option? It's an awfully convenient option for you to come up with."

"Either way, that's what it is."

They spent fifteen minutes arguing about whether Kaitani was "cheating" or whether he was exercising an "option" but Kaitani stuck to his guns and Fujiwara finally caved. They got into a taxi and headed to Belzard S. In the back seat, Fujiwara sat at the far edge of the seat and silently stared out the window. Kaitani had him by the balls (or rather, the ball), and so Fujiwara accompanied him to the bar without another complaint.

"Doing some after-hours business?" the taxi driver inquired. "Maybe meeting your girlfriends?" His inquiries were met with stony silence. He promptly shut up and drove them to their destination without another word.

They got out of the taxi in front of the retail district. Kaitani led the way, Fujiwara tailing about five yards behind. He stopped in front of Belzard S., and Fujiwara examined the nameplate, a very dubious look on his face.

Kaitani opened the door and they went inside. The look of the establishment had changed completely. Glittering beaded curtains decorated the walls. A large mirror ball hung from the ceiling. He hadn't seen anything like it except in old 1970s disco movies.

Dance music swirled around the room. There were about ten people in the place, but the way their eyes all fell on the two of them was not a little intimidating.

"Kaitani-chan! Welcome, welcome!" Tomoharu jumped out from behind the bar and gave him a bear hug.

"H-Hi."

Kaitani felt the press of his muscularity for a moment, and then Tomoharu let him go and turned to Fujiwara. "Welcome. And how are you?" Tomoharu grinned. Fujiwara answered with an expressionless nod. Tomoharu's outfit consisted of a three-piece white suit, white patent leather shoes, and a patterned shirt with the big collar worn outside the jacket. The problem wasn't whether it suited him or not, but that the ensemble was a bit—no, more than a bit—unsightly.

"Today our theme is Saturday Night Fever. The music is the Bee Gees. Come on over. Mr. Adonis, too."

At being called "Mr. Adonis," Fujiwara's eyebrows twitched, but he maintained his cool.

They sat on the barstools. "A beer for Kaitani-chan, Tomoharu said, ordering for him. "And what does Mr. Adonis desire? "The house drink I recommend is called Sex on the Beach."

With no indication that he'd heard a word Tomoharu said, Fujiwara ordered a completely different drink, a "Gibson."

Tomoharu disappeared into the galley. At the same time, having only uttered one word thus far, Fujiwara said under his breath, "Just what kind of place is this?"

"What kind of place? It's a gay bar."

Fujiwara held his head in his hands in utter amazement.

"Huh? Didn't I tell you?"

Fujiwara once again fell into a pensive silence. He took the warm hand towel the young waiter had given him and scrubbed his hands.

"Hello," said a soft voice.

When they looked around, a punk was sitting down in the empty chair next to Fujiwara. He wore a T-shirt and jeans, and no other ornamentation. His white teeth were dazzling. He was good looking and his short hair suited him well. Like Fujiwara, he radiated an air of fastidiousness.

"Mind if we talk?"

Tomoharu said this was a dance party only in name. Its true function was a men's mixer. No doubt, the punk had his eye on Fujiwara. Considering that Kaitani was sitting there, he was being pretty forward. Kaitani glanced at him and their eyes met.

"Hey, no need to look at me like that. Just let us talk a minute and I'll push off."

Since Kaitani wasn't giving him any kind of "look," the punk was implying that Kaitani was jealous. That did tick him off. The placid, smiling face and the punk's eyes seemed to be saying, I'm a lot prettier than you.

"Have you been here before?"

"No," Fujiwara bluntly replied.

"Oh, what a wonderful voice. From the moment I walked in, I knew you were a beautiful person. I just had to find out for myself what kind of a voice such a beauty had."

Like attracts like. The punk's snobbery, every bit the equal of Fujiwara's, made Kaitani shudder. Fujiwara was doing his best to ignore him, but Kaitani found the two of them sitting there talking together annoying.

"Hey, Boss," Kaitani said.

"Even in private he calls you Boss? Oh, how pathetic is that?

Fujiwara met his gaze for a moment. Kaitani reddened. The faux-pas served only to carve his classlessness in stone. It was mortally embarrassing.

Having handily dispatched Kaitani, the kid went on without missing a beat. "You smell great. What cologne do you use?"

"It's a discontinued product, not widely available." Fujiwara spoke in a quiet, resonating voice. "And I'm sorry to say so, but I'd appreciate you not getting so close to me. I can't abide the body odor of men." The punk had been on a solid winning streak until then. The color abruptly left his face. Fujiwara said, "I don't mean to suggest that your scent is particularly offensive, but I do find it a tad annoying."

The punk muttered an apology and clumsily slid off the barstool and walked away. With a calm expression, Fujiwara lifted the drink Tomoharu had brought him to his lips.

"Mr. Adonis, you are so cruel."

Tomoharu must have been standing there behind the counter for a while. He folded his arms on the counter top and rested his chin on his hands, like a pinup model posing. "It was bad of the kid to make a pass at you when you already had a boyfriend, but that was a bit over the top."

Fujiwara looked straight at Tomoharu. "My name isn't Adonis. It's Fujiwara."

"I'm so sorry, Fujiwara-san," Tomoharu apologized with a grin. Fujiwara finished his Gibson.

Tomoharu offered him a coffee-colored cocktail.

"I didn't order this," said Fujiwara, giving the cocktail an odd glance.

"All of our first-time customers get one on the house. It's called an Orgasm. Very cool, don't you think?"

It was "cool," not "suggestive" and not "obscene." As expected, Fujiwara drew a sour face, but couldn't refuse the gift. He and Kaitani hadn't in fact come here for dinner, but Tomoharu emerged from the galley with two servings of a pasta and sandwich plate. While eating this light repast, other customers bought Fujiwara three more cocktails. He was an alluring and seductive man, and an attractive face like that was popular currency, regardless of sexual orientation.

When he'd finished the meal and consumed the three cocktails, he reached down for the briefcase at his feet. Kaitani glanced at his watch. One hour had passed since they'd entered the bar.

"Hey, Fujiwara-san," Tomoharu said. "I know that people have all sorts of predilections. "I'm not denying you yours, but I also believe that square pegs don't belong in round holes."

This statement obviously confused Fujiwara. He put down the briefcase.

"The way I look at it, Kaitani-chan isn't the S type."

As far as Tomoharu was concerned, Fujiwara remained "Mr. M," who preferred getting tied up. Fujiwara cast a glare at Kaitani, who lowered his head as if in apology.

"Kaitani-chan is an innocent and naive boy. That's why I think that, rather than being the dominant one, indulging him would be more in keeping with his character. I have to think doing so would bring out the better parts of his personality."

Fujiwara placed his right elbow on the counter top and touched his forehead to his hand. A minute later, he raised his head. "I appreciate the advice, but this is a matter between him and me. I would ask you not to interfere."

An angry expression crossed Tomoharu's face, but his bartender's mien soon returned. "I see. Forgive me."

"Should the situation arise, I would wish to leave him in your good hands, but presently he is the man of my dreams."

Tomoharu was left momentarily speechless. Then he unexpectedly chuckled. "I'm being a jerk," he said with a shrug. "But let me ask you this one last thing. Do you really love Kaitani-chan?"

Fujiwara looked like he'd just swallowed a very bitter pill. He sighed. "I cannot but say that I do."

He wasn't gay and wasn't into S&M, though they now mistakenly thought he was. Fujiwara only came to the gay bar because Kaitani had blackmailed him with the photos. In order to divert the attention of a macho gay with the hots for Kaitani, Fujiwara had to say he loved him. He could comprehend Fujiwara's distress, but Tomoharu seemed to be taking it all at face value.

"Ah, I have been utterly defeated." Tomoharu slowly shook his head. He handed Fujiwara another cocktail.

"I've already had—" Fujiwara started to say, turning down the drink.

Tomoharu wagged his finger back and forth. "No, no, no. A toast to lost loves. This one's called a Blue Drop. Sweet, sour, and just a bit bitter. Before you leave, you must drink down my tears."

The drink Fujiwara was given was obviously too much for him, but as he saw no escape unless and until he drained the glass, he picked it up and gulped it down in a single swig. His job there was finished. But as soon as he slid off the barstool, his body swayed alarmingly. Kaitani thought for a moment that he was going to fall over, until he grabbed hold of the counter top and held on for dear life.

"Are you okay?" Kaitani asked.

Fujiwara didn't answer. He clawed his way back to the barstool. He sat down and his head slumped to his chest. He caught Kaitani out of the corner of his eyes. "Call a taxi for me."

When Kaitani pulled out his cell, Tomoharu beckoned him to a corner of the bar. "Come over here for a moment."

Kaitani wondered what in the world he was up to, but Tomoharu was calling him, so he went. "You don't need to call a taxi," Tomoharu whispered in his ear. "That killer cocktail of mine contained a few sleeping pills and an aphrodisiac. He'll be high as a kite. You can use the room in the back. Tonight you become a man!"

Kaitani remembered Tomoharu promising to do him this "favor."

"I don't let regular customers use the room, but

I'll make an exception for you two. It's just a bedroom with an attached bath. Take your time and enjoy yourselves."

At this juncture, Kaitani couldn't tell him, "No, thanks." He mumbled and prevaricated until Tomoharu gave Fujiwara a once-over and hoisted him up, light as a feather, and disappeared into the back. Kaitani ran after him and found himself in a hallway adjacent the galley. Tomoharu opened a mahogany door, revealing a small, five-tatami-mat room. The adjoining bathroom was furnished with a glass-sided shower and toilet. The walls were an elegant cream color. At a glance, the room looked like a business hotel room.

There was a double bed in the room, and Tomoharu laid Fujiwara out on the white sheets. Kaitani stood there, kind-of spaced-out. Tomoharu took his hand and led him outside the room.

"I gave him a rich blend of aphrodisiacs. Pretty soon, his loins are going to start aching so bad he won't be able to stand it. Since you're a beginner, I left some toys by the bed. If you get the urge, feel free to use them. Or not, as the case may be.

"Ah, sure," said Kaitani.

Tomoharu clapped him on the back. "Go get 'em, cowboy!" he said. "Yuichi said that your lover was a real beauty. When it comes to beauty, personal preferences are pretty broad, you know? No matter big the build up, there's always a let-down. But today, when you brought Fujiwara-san here, I was surprised. He is perfect from every angle. I'm not into pretty boys, but even I couldn't help falling under his spell. Mr. M really must be too good to be true."

He entwined his arms with Kaitani's. "However," he added, "I'm not saying that he's a bad person, or that he doesn't love you, but he hasn't got a very nice disposition." Tomoharu grinned and patted Kaitani between his thighs.

"W-What are you doing?"

"Your ill-tempered Mr. M had better give you a hard workout. Bye-bye."

Tomoharu retreated to the bar in a decidedly good mood.

Chapter 14

Having come this far, and with his retreat cut off, Kaitani walked into the room. Fujiwara was lying on his back on the bed. Perhaps because of the bright overhead light, he had his arms over his eyes. Kaitani sat on the edge of the bed with his back to him. Out of courtesy to Tomoharu, who'd set all this up for him, he might as well stay until morning. Afterward, he'd get together with Fujiwara and they'd concoct an account of the night's goings-on, one that had best have the strong smell of truth about it.

He checked his watch. Nine o'clock. Fujiwara was pretty well smashed, but it was too early to sleep. Kaitani paced around the cramped room. The room consisted of the bed, a side table and one chair. There weren't any closets. On top of the table, next to a desk lamp, was a white tray and a wicker basket the size of a shoe box. Condoms neatly lined the tray like a candy sampler. The variety of sizes surprised him.

He lifted the top of the wicket basket and gaped at the sex toys inside: a vibrator with a pink rotor and a clear attachment that looked like a sea anemone, K-Y Jelly, even rope. Kaitani couldn't resist his curiosity and picked up the sea anemone vibrator. It was soft to the touch, even pleasant. He switched it on. The tip oscillated back and forth like the foot of a mollusk.

"Scary."

He quickly turned it off and the movement stopped. He stared at the grotesque gadget. "Exactly where and how would you use this?" he said to himself. "You must insert the part that's sticking out," he instructed himself, like the straight man in a comedy routine. But the sea anemone part was fairly wide in diameter and pretty long. In other words, he concluded, a big, artificial anus.

There wasn't a television in the room, and with nothing else to do, he was getting bored. Kaitani yawned, took off his suit coat, and hung it on the back of the chair. He turned on the desk lamp and turned off the room light. Fujiwara was asleep in the middle of the bed. Kaitani pushed him to the side nearest the wall, making enough room for himself. The air conditioning was on the cool side, but it felt nice that way.

When he pulled the sheets over his shoulders, a sweet smell wafted up. The Section Chief's cologne. Kaitani didn't hate it. In fact, he rather liked it. Now, if only a woman were wearing it, that'd be another matter entirely. He sensed the man behind him moving around. Thinking he was simply stirring in his sleep, Kaitani didn't pay him any attention at first. But then Fujiwara's weight landed on his back with a thud he felt in his chest.

"Hey, you're heavy."

When Kaitani raised his shoulders to get him off, he got the distinct impression that Fujiwara was snuggling closer. Something stuck to the back of his neck like a leech sucking on his flesh.

What the hell, he thought, forcibly turning himself over. Their eyes met. The inflamed, round pupils of Fujiwara's eyes dilated, glittering in the darkness. Fujiwara said, "You're cute."

With this pronouncement, his face drew closer, like in a camera zoom. "Whoa, wait!" said Kaitani, thrusting out both hands, but not in time. Fujiwara wrapped his arms firmly around Kaitani's head and kissed him.

Kaitani couldn't scream, and couldn't free himself from Fujiwara's firm hold. Fujiwara altered the angle of the kiss, and Kaitani's was utterly unprepared when his tongue stole into his mouth. He couldn't shut his mouth at this point; he could only pull his tongue back to his tonsils as Fujiwara pressed forward with his attack, licking him.

Perhaps concluding that he was being too passive, Fujiwara began teasing another spot, sliding his tongue across the roof of Kaitani's mouth and sending tingles up his spine. He hadn't ever felt anything like before in his life. He'd been French-kissed before, but nothing like this soppy wet suckling. Clearly, Fujiwara knew how to kiss, and as loath as Kaitani was to admit it, he was good at it.

Preoccupied with the kiss and Fujiwara's waist grinding against his midsection, Kaitani felt Fujiwara's fingers touch his bare skin, pinching his nipples hard enough to hurt a bit. His loins suddenly began to throb.

"You have cute breasts," Fujiwara whispered in his ear, in a low voice that sent a shiver ran up his back. "I like small breasts." He gave Kaitani another pinch, and Kaitani couldn't help but yelp.

At the sound of his own girlish-sounding voice, Kaitani came to his senses. "Hey boss. Sober up. It's me, Yasukazu Kaitani." He put his hands on Fujiwara's shoulders and pushed him off.

Fujiwara didn't answer and showed no signs of retreating. "Nobody's forcing you, and nobody's getting hurt, so let's have a good time together," he said, provocatively straddling Kaitani's stomach.

Kaitani could tell that his boss was tremendously erect. Maybe if he was a girl, that'd be cause for celebration, but watching another guy get excited wasn't exactly a thrill. Rather, it was a bit disgusting. Give me a break, he practically wept.

"I want you so much I'm going to explode. I must quench myself inside you."

Kaitani didn't have the equipment to do any quenching and Fujiwara wasn't listening to him. He probably didn't even know who he was trying to make love to. Realizing that nothing he said wouldn't make a bit of difference, and using both arms and legs, he pushed Fujiwara off him, jumped from the bed, and ran to the door. First of all, he was going to clear out of this room, he thought, putting his hand on the doorknob.

What? What's this? He rattled the knob back and forth but the door wouldn't open. The door was locked, but there wasn't a lock on the inner panel of the door. The lock must be on the outside. Kaitani banged on the door with all his might. "Tomoharu-san, open the door! Tomoharu-san!"

He shouted at the top of his voice, but there was no reply. It was doubtful that anybody could hear him

over the throbbing sound of decades-old disco music and boisterous dancing pounding through the door.

"Tomoharu-san—"

Kaitani sensed Fujiwara approaching. "Is it fun leading me on like this?"

Leading him on was the last thing on his mind. Kaitani shook him off and scanned the room, looking for an escape route. There were no windows and no closets. The only enclosed space was the unit shower. Kaitani headed for the shower and jumped in. Unfortunately, there wasn't a latch.

Fujiwara closed in on him and grabbed the door.

Kaitani frantically held onto the door to keep it from opening. The contest of wills turned into a tug-of-war. Evenly matched, it ended in a stalemate.

Just then, a knock came at the door. "Kaitani-chan?"

Tomoharu had arrived. Unprepared for his arrival, Kaitani relaxed his hold for a second. Fujiwara flung open the shower door, jumped in, and wrapped his arms around him. The back of Kaitani's head hit the wall, leaving him dazed. Fujiwara's hot kisses again fell on his lips.

Tomoharu muttered to himself, "That's odd. Must have been my imagination." His presence faded away.

Momentarily escaping Fujiwara's amorous advances, Kaitani yelled, "Help!" but there was no reply. Tangled up in such a tight space, he couldn't shake Fujiwara off. To make matters worse, the way Fujiwara touched his chest and ass grossed him out. The man coiled around his body like an octopus. Kaitani walloped him, pulled free, and ran to the door.

"Open up! Open the door!"

He clung to the door. He felt Fujiwara coming up behind him, but continued to pound on the door and cry out. "Open—"

He heard the rustling of clothes and the bottom half of his body was suddenly several degrees cooler. Kaitani cast a quick glance down and saw his underpants and trousers bunched around his ankles. In the next instant, realizing he was bare from the waist down, he sensed the warmth of flesh against his chilled skin. And even worse, something hard thrusting between his thighs . . . something . . . .

"Ahhhhh!"

Bending forward and grabbing his underpants, Kaitani caught his heels in the cuffs of his trousers and lost his balance and fell on his face. "Ow, dammit!"

A shadow eclipsed the dim light. A weight descended on his back. Oh, shit! Kaitani thought. If Fujiwara came at him from the rear, he couldn't do much to hold him back.

"You're a lively little kitten," Fujiwara whispered in his ear. He plastered himself against Kaitani's back and held him tightly around the waist. His hard, hot rod plunged between Kaitani's bare buttocks, jabbing his scrotum with every salacious hump of his hips.

"Boss, wake up!" Kaitani pleaded, crawling forward. "I'm Kaitani, the guy who took the picture of your testicle. I've got a penis, and I haven't got anyplace to put yours!"

Fujiwara seemed to be searching for a place to put his. His erection prowled Kaitani's nether regions. Give it up already! Or come to your senses, you idiot! Kaitani had managed to put up with the unpleasantness of being frisked by a foreign penis, but then it stopped, and he suddenly overcome by a bad sense of foreboding.

"Ah, this should do!" Fujiwara said under his breath.

No, this shouldn't do! Kaitani felt all the blood draining from his body. "Don't go there!"

At the sensation of his sphincter being forced open, his whole body recoiled and every hair stood on end. He waggled his hips back and forth to throw him off, but Fujiwara stayed glued to his ass. In this state, Fujiwara was going to have his way with him. He wasn't becoming a man. Fujiwara was turning him into his bitch.

"Aarrgh," Kaitani growled, gritting his teeth, and with all his might pushing up with his arms and doing a complete one-eighty. Unprepared for the sudden impact, Fujiwara relaxed his arms and Kaitani seized the moment to jump to his feet and leap onto the bed. Fujiwara got to his feet like some invincible zombie and took a step forward.

"Not an inch closer, you stupid prick!" Kaitani screamed, his voice climbing an octave. He picked up the tray off the bedside table and threw it at him, condoms and all. He usually had pretty good control, but perhaps because he was trembling so hard the tray only skimmed

Fujiwara's right shoulder and hit the wall behind him.

After that, he threw whatever he could lay his hands on, the pink sea anemone vibrator, anything. None of it caused any damage, and it only made Fujiwara furrow his brows. Searching for another weapon, Kaitani stuck his hand into the wicker basket and found there his means of escape.

He grabbed the rope, yelled and leapt down from the bed, clotheslining Fujiwara like a professional wrestler. Fujiwara dropped on his back, stunned. Kaitani bound his arms with the rope, and then dragged the slug of a man to the door, wrapped the end of the rope around the doorknob and wrenched it tight.

Having confirmed that he'd been immobilized, Kaitani picked up his underpants and trousers. His thighs were sticky and gross, so he wiped them off with a corner of the bed sheet, putting out of his mind for the time being what it was he was wiping off. He crawled onto the bed and stretched out, exhausted in body and spirit. When he softly touched his rear end, the sensation of almost being penetrated still remained. It was a very depressing feeling.

Ah, this should do! Fujiwara had cried. Kaitani didn't think he could ever get over being violated by a man, let alone Fujiwara.

Stark naked except for his shirt, still looking all revved up and ready to go, Fujiwara dangled there by his tethered hands. As far as Kaitani was concerned, the horny bastard could stay that way until morning. Kaitani turned his back to him and cursed him in his heart. But even when he lay down, he couldn't sleep. More that all

of the excitement, he was scared that if Fujiwara got out of his constraints, he'd attack him again.

"My hands—please undo my hands."

Despite the feeble pleas, Kaitani pulled the sheets around his shoulders and pretended not to hear. The next thing he heard was Fujiwara weeping. Between hicks and sobs, Fujiwara cried, "It hurts, it hurts."

The first thing that came to Kaitani's mind was, How about if I gave you one right in that arrogant face of yours, think that would hurt, too? Serves you right.

But Fujiwara kept on whimpering, "It hurts, it hurts" and "You're taking this too far."

It started to get to him. Kaitani glanced at the man tied up to the doorknob. Fujiwara was squirming around in a strange way. Something strange was up. Kaitani cautiously approached him. Fujiwara's legs were clamped together and big teardrops fell on his thighs. His hips heaved in an undulating motion.

"What's the matter with you?"

Fujiwara looked up at him, his eyes brimming. "It hurts. It's so tight it hurts."

"What, you got a stomachache or something?"

Fujiwara spread his legs apart. His engorged erection appeared, already wet and glistening with precum. Kaitani gaped.

"It's hurts so much. Help me."

Tears tumbled from his moist eyes. This must be the effect of the aphrodisiac Tomoharu had warned him about. Kaitani knew what it was like to have a cock so hard it hurt, and drugs being the cause in this case, he felt somewhat responsible. If Fujiwara could just masturbate for a while, that should take care of it, but the idea of cutting him loose still gave Kaitani the creeps.

Even if he was a sexual omnivore who did men and women, and did it anally with equal abandon, he wasn't about to have Fujiwara jumping him again.

"Please, please, let me come inside you."

No way am I letting you go, Kaitani told himself.

"Then give me a hand job. Get me off."

He repeated this request, the tears tumbling down his cheeks. His detestable member, the very one that had made a good try at violating Kaitani's ass, fluttered up and down as if in apology.

"Oh, it hurts too much!"

Fujiwara's body squirmed and writhed. Completely at a loss, Kaitani noticed a pair of gray boxers on the floor not far off. They sported a high-class label. He picked up the name-brand boxers and draped them over Fujiwara's taut cock, both to hide it and to keep from touching it directly. Then Kaitani softly grasped him.

From that contact alone, Fujiwara groaned in ecstasy. His loins and singular scrotum began to tremble. "Stronger, stronger!" he demanded, in a husky voice.

Thinking that if he could get Fujiwara to come once, the horndog would settle down, Kaitani more assiduously moved his right hand. He pumped up and down, alternatively loosening and tightening his grip. Rather than going half-assed at the job, he focused on the task at hand in order to get it over with as quickly as possible.

"Haa, haa, haa," Fujiwara gasped. God, the man had stamina. If Kaitani closed his eyes, he could imagine he was listening to the panting of a woman. Exasperated that Fujiwara hadn't come already, he peeled back the pair of shorts. Though Fujiwara's precum was visible he showed no signs of ejaculating any time soon, and he was still hard.

Kaitani closed his eyes and worked his right hand, pretending that a woman was making those low moans. He caught the whiff of a sweet scent as Fujiwara's tongue licked his earlobe, sending a jolt through his spine. He jerked back.

"W-What the hell are you doing?"

Fujiwara's moist eyes looked into his; beautiful, erotic eyes staring straight through him. Kaitani couldn't look away. "Come over here by me," Fujiwara whispered, in a murmuring voice that reverberated down to the pit of his stomach.

Kaitani didn't exactly understand why, but it unnerved him. "Stop saying stupid things. I'm just lending you a hand until you come."

He yanked hard on the boxers covering Fujiwara's penis. "Ah!" Fujiwara gasped. "If you kiss me, I'll come," he whispered in a coaxing voice, smiling at him with upturned eyes. Kaitani gulped and swallowed hard. Even with both of Fujiwara's hands bound, wearing only a shirt, a pair of brand name boxers hanging off his cock, he was a frighteningly handsome man.

Fujiwara's red tongue flicked over Kaitani's lips. His salacious eyes saw only him. Kaitani's heart bounded in his chest, his groin became strangely inflamed. If this would get him off quicker, so he could wash his hands of him— Even though he grasped the logic of the proposition, Kaitani couldn't stop looking at that face.

"You're going to come if I kiss you?" he asked.

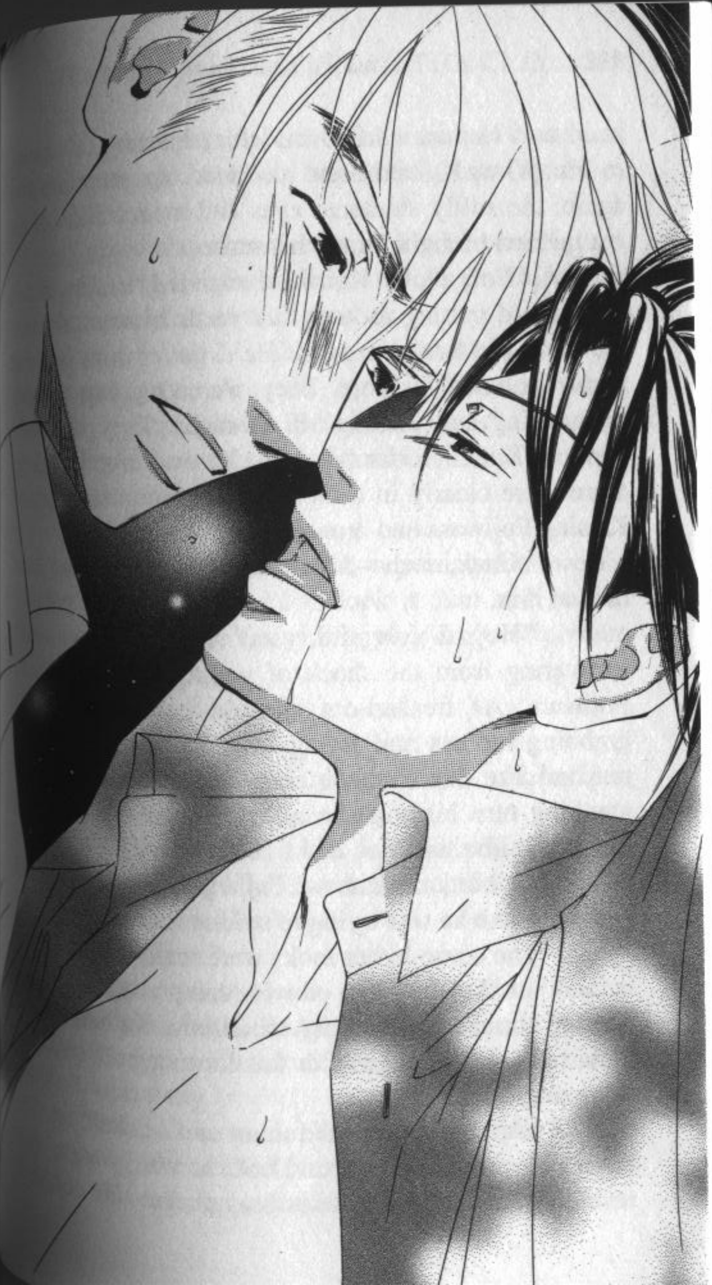
Fujiwara lowered his eyes and said coyly, "Only if you kissed me right and well."

Just as his head felt like it was going to explode, Kaitani jumped him, put him in a headlock and sucked on his lips like crazy, ravaging his mouth with his tongue. The madness faded and their lips parted, and Kaitani was overcome with a violent self-loathing.

"You're a rough one," he heard Fujiwara murmur, and at once felt a soft warmth on his lips; it was Fujiwara kissing him. With his bottom lip and then upper lip, he gently opened himself against his mouth. As the pleasant feelings suffused him, their tongues touched. The tingling raced through Kaitani's brain like a shock of electricity. Halfway through the kiss, instead of simply letting Fujiwara take the lead, he energetically entwined their tongues. The slippery wet coupling of their mouths was so hot and so overpowering, Kaitani felt like he was melting.

In between the kisses came the sweet gasps. The body wrapped in his arms shuddered. Had he finally— When he pulled the boxers away from his groin, the milky fluid drew a thread across the fabric. Even without working him with his hand, Fujiwara could come just from kissing.

Fujiwara licked his cheek, Kaitani raised his



head and Fujiwara lifted his chin, inviting his mouth to his. When Kaitani drew his faced closer to kiss him again, the softly shuttered eyes and mannerisms of his companion brought him to his senses.

"Holy shit!" Kaitani exclaimed, beating a fast retreat and putting at least two yards between the two of them. He turned around. He'd gotten him off, and that concluded his role. They weren't going to keep on necking and jacking-off all night. They definitely weren't. Kaitani looked down at his own crotch. Things there were clearly in a more turgid state than normal. Kissing Fujiwara had brought things to this point.

"Ouch, ouch—" That selfsame voice came from behind him.

"Hey, I just did you," he shot back, still recovering from the shock of getting a hard-on from Fujiwara. As freaked-out as he'd been by this guy grabbing his ass and trying to mount him, that he'd respond like this was one crazy-ass revelation. Would anything turn him on? he asked himself. Was he that much of a libertine?

"It hurts, it hurts—" Fujiwara kept saying over and over, like he was trying to seduce Kaitani again.

The come-hither looks were really beginning to irritate him. Leading him on with that pretty face of his, playing him like a fucking schoolboy, Kaitani finally blew his top. "Enough with this hurting bullshit! Quit lying to me!"

Kaitani approached him and picked up the boxers covering his privates. Look! he was going to say, revealing the evidence of his limp pecker. He couldn't

believe his own eyes. He'd watched Fujiwara come just a few minutes ago, and here he was fully erect again.

"Touch me—"

Fujiwara's voice reverberated in his ears. Kaitani swallowed hard. He put his hand directly on Fujiwara's member, already moist with precum.

"Ah . . . ah . . . ahhh . . . ." echoed Fujiwara indecorous gasps. Aroused by his voice, Kaitani vigorously pumped away at Fujiwara's cock. He must be enjoying it for he threw his head back, and his body twisted and writhed.

"Kiss me."

"No way," Kaitani said, repulsing the sweetly enticing pleas. He refused to look at him and instead stared at Fujiwara's erection, dripping drops of precum as if it were weeping.

"Let's do it again."

"Like hell."

If he looked at Fujiwara, he'd seduce him. Kaitani focused his attention elsewhere.

"But you wouldn't kiss somebody if you didn't like them. I'm doing all the work down here, so you can come whenever you like."

"I love you."

These unexpected words made Kaitani inadvertently lift his head. All at once, he found himself captured by eyes suffused with hot sexual desire and he couldn't look away.

"D-Don't lie to me. You're the one who told me to bugger off. You called me an asshole."

"But only because you're so cute."

He said it as if the one statement somehow had something to do with the other. His enticements did not slacken. No matter how effective that aphrodisiac was, that they were conversing meant he couldn't still be unconscious. Perhaps the alcohol and drugs were making him reveal what was in his heart?

"If you really love me, then what is my name?"

"Hiromi."

Having begun to believe in his heart that Fujiwara truly loved him, he felt like a fool. "What did you say Hiromi for? Give me the right answer!"

"Then Natsuki."

"That's not my name. I'm Kaitani, Kaitani."

He seemed to ruminate over the name. Suddenly he whispered, to Kaitani's surprise, "Anna. That's right, it's Anna. C'mere, Anna."

Kaitani was known in the company as "Yasukazu." He didn't think anybody knew his real name.

"Anna," Fujiwara said, staring at him.

Kaitani moved closer to him. "How do you know my real name?" he asked in a quiet voice.

Fujiwara smiled, his face so beautiful it made Kaitani's head spin. "I never forget the names of the cute ones. So kiss me, Anna."

Something snapped inside his head. At the same time, the lower half of his body came energetically back to life. Like an overly-friendly dog he licked Fujiwara's face all over, followed by deep, wet, dripping French kissing as he squeezed and milked Fujiwara's perky penis. Kaitani felt himself growing more and more

impatient. His erection jutted from his fly. He worked his and Fujiwara's together.

"Yes . . . yes . . . ahhh . . . " Fujiwara gasped in his ear.

Kaitani wasn't ready quite yet, but he was plenty hard. Just a little bit more, he thought, when Fujiwara took a ragged breath and Kaitani's fingers grew sticky. Fujiwara had come first. He felt a bit forlorn, having to forge on by himself. Almost as if in revenge, he prodded Fujiwara's scrotum and its single testicle with his cock.

His erection unexpectedly slipped beneath Fujiwara's scrotum and brushed against something soft and pliant. Kaitani started. Fujiwara took notice as well, giving him the kind of look that could get a girl pregnant with a mere glance.

It was the same part of the body Kaitani had a few minutes ago been too scared to let anything enter. Reduced as he'd been to a whimpering wreck, here he was contemplating doing the same to Fujiwara. Logically, since the term "anal sex" existed, penetration must be possible. If it was okay with Fujiwara, he wanted to give it a try. He wanted to come inside this great-feeling body. His own inconsistencies reared up in his face. If the thought so disgusted him, could he do the same to Fujiwara? Would Fujiwara permit him?

As Kaitani anguished over this question, in a flash the answer popped into his head. He'd been frightened before because no love was involved, frightened because Fujiwara was forcing himself on him. But this time it was different. Fujiwara said he loved him. It was consensual, so that made it all right.

Kissing him, Kaitani searched between his buttocks with his right hand. He pressed on his sphincter with his finger. Fujiwara's back trembled. The surrounding flesh was soft, but the mouth was hard. Perhaps this wouldn't be so easy after all, he thought, rubbing himself against Fujiwara's bottom, but not wishing to give up the effort.

And then he remembered. He hurried to the bedside table and got the tube of K-Y Jelly out of the wicker basket. He squeezed the thick ointment onto his hand and massaged Fujiwara's ass. Yet there was still the fearsome task of forcing himself past his sphincter. Every journey begins with the first step, he told himself. Screwing up his courage, he thrust in his index finger.

"Ahhh—" grunted Fujiwara, his hips heaving.

After the initial penetration, Kaitani was surprised to be met with little resistance. It was hard going in, but then soft and warm. When he wriggled his finger, Fujiwara's whole body shook. His bewitching eyes glistened.

"Does it hurt?"

"No. It doesn't hurt, but it feels funny."

If it didn't hurt, then full-speed ahead! Emboldened by this initial success, Kaitani thrust in a second finger.

"No . . . no . . . . "

Fujiwara squirmed violently, but said nothing about feeling any pain. In that same warm place, Kaitani flexed his fingers more broadly. Along with the motions of his fingers, Fujiwara's hips began to undulate. When the mouth seemed to soften, Kaitani grabbed one of the condoms scattered about and quickly put it on. His nerves worn raw with eager impatience, and while holding himself back from the impending eruption, he firmly pressed his way inside.

Fujiwara screamed. That which should have been pliant had drawn tight. Better, Kaitani imagined, to penetrate him with one sure motion than worry his way in. He thrust his hips forward.

"No . . . stop . . . stop, please. Anna. It hurts. Anna—"

"Hold on, just hold on."

Repeatedly kissing Fujiwara as he desired, Kaitani rocked his hips side-to-side. Just as Fujiwara limp penis again stood up, Kaitani changed to an up and down motion.

Fujiwara bleated and bellowed and seemed to be becoming unglued. His body shuddered violently. His torso shook; his legs spasmed. Wanting to be embraced by him, Kaitani unbound his hands.

"Does it feel good?" Kaitani asked, kissing Fujiwara's white forehead, glistening with sweat. "Does this feel good?"

He thrust gently. A distressed gasp was followed by a trance-like reply, "Ahhh—"

"It doesn't hurt, does it?"

Fujiwara shook his head, and whispered in Kaitani's ear, "Push against the part in front, just inside me—"

In accordance with his wishes, Kaitani engaged in a series of shallow thrusts.

"Ahhh," the sweet sounds suddenly burst forth.

Kaitani concentrated his attack on that sweet spot. Fujiwara trembled and his loins began to quiver. "Ahhh . . . ahhh . . . there . . . yes . . . yes . . . ."

Fujiwara's body shook and he climaxed. At the same time, Kaitani released all of the desire dammed up inside, too.

Kaitani picked up the exhausted and depleted Fujiwara and carried him to the bed. As he lay there, he absent-mindedly stared at the door. Simply looking at Fujiwara's parted mouth and his languid expression gave him a hard-on.

Fujiwara was pretty and sexy, and being inside him made Kaitani very happy. He couldn't stand it any longer and again approached Fujiwara. Perhaps sensing the turbulent roiling forces inside Kaitani, Fujiwara recoiled from him as if in fear, looking up at him with moist eyes.

Perhaps, Kaitani thought, he should take a little time, give it a rest—but that was impossible. Kaitani straddled Fujiwara, turned him over facing up, and plastered himself again his body, kissing him fiercely, grinding against his erection against Fujiwara's groin.

"Ahh . . . no . . . Anna . . . Anna . . . ."

Ignoring his protestations, Kaitani spread Fujiwara's legs apart, as he once he had before. He could think of nothing but that rosy, wet center inviting him in, slowly swallowing the tip of his prick. Before pressing deeper, he rocked rhythmically back and forth, causing Fujiwara to moan, "Ahh . . . ahh . . ." as he became erect as well. Gradually, Kaitani could spare no more effort at pleasuring his companion and violently thrust his hips

back and forth.

Their gasping cries faded away, and even when their bodies convulsed like marionettes trembling at the ends of their strings, Kaitani could not relent; he could only continue to devour Fujiwara's exquisite body.

Chapter 15

Kaitani opened his eyes to the sound of the key turning in the lock. The room was suddenly brighter. Dazzled, he reflexively shut in eyes. When his eyes had become accustomed to the light, he looked toward the doorway. The door cracked open and a well-muscled man poked his head around the jamb.

"May I come in, Kaitani-chan?"

"Ah, yeah, sure," Kaitani said, still half asleep.

When Tomoharu entered the room, he firmly clasped Kaitani's hands and sniffed several times. "Ah, I smell the scent of love," he said, with shining eyes. "You've attained your desire, Kaitani-chan!"

Covering himself with the sheets, Kaitani nodded with a wry grin. The companion who'd accomplished it without intending to was asleep next to him.

"Oh, that's right. So people can't lock themselves away in here, the door can't be locked from the inside. I took the liberty of locking the door from the outside. I hope that didn't inconvenience you."

Thanks to the locked door, Fujiwara had almost made Kaitani anything but a man. But there was no sense bringing that up now. "Ah, no, not at all," he replied.

"There are too many boorish jerks hanging around the place. I wanted to show you two off a bit. What makes you two happy makes us all happy. But since you're a beginner, Kaitani-chan, I didn't want anything to obstruct your first night together. That's why."

Tomoharu cast his eyes down at Fujiwara, lying next to Kaitani. "He's a beautiful man even when he's asleep. Such long eyelashes and such fair skin."

Without really thinking about it, Kaitani covered Fujiwara with a nearby sheet. Tomoharu shrugged as if to say, I'm just looking, so don't be so stingy.

"Well, yes, I suppose he does," Kaitani said, scratching his head.

"At any rate, you two certainly put on a performance," Tomoharu laughed. "Practically brought the roof down. Just what kind of sex was it?"

At the mention of sex, thoughts of their dizzying couplings bloomed in his head. He reddened all the way up to his ears. "We, uh, did it a bunch of times, but I think it was pretty normal sex."

Tomoharu chuckled. "Well, I'll be taking off soon. Go ahead and take you time, Kaitani-chan. I'll leave the key with you. When you done here, drop the key in mailbox 408 in the building next door, first floor. Don't worry about the cleaning up. I'm such an unrequited romantic, I don't want to ruin the mood." With that parting word, he left. A moment later, the door opened again. "Oh, I almost forgot, Kaitani-chan. Your face is so sexy, now that you're a real man."

Tomoharu's parting wink seemed to sail over and pat him on the cheek. The fatigue suddenly fell like a weight on his shoulders. Kaitani sighed, staring at the man sleeping next to him, curled up like a kitten. He slowly pulled away the sheet he hiding Fujiwara from

Tomoharu's prying eyes.

Not only Fujiwara's back, but his torso and lower limbs were fair as well. His body hair was so light that Kaitani couldn't really tell whether it was growing there or not. Not a mole or pimple marred his skin. In contrast to his white face, his lips prominently stood out. Imagining those salacious, pale coral lips going down on him, Kaitani got hot between the thighs.

He was keenly aware that he'd done it with a guy—that he could do it with a guy. He's had sex with a man and it trumped anything he'd ever experienced before. Does that make me gay? he wondered. He hadn't had a lover in a long time and he'd gotten to be good friends with his right hand. The idea that perhaps he'd only been blowing off all that sublimated lust sobered him up a little. But despite how much unsated desire he'd been storing up, no matter how seductive his companion, did he really want to do it with a man? And if so, could he do it with any other man? For example, Tomoharu or Higashiyama?

He grounded this flight of fantasy mid-flight. It was just . . . too . . . gross. Obviously, this was all about Fujiwara. When he thought about things in this context, it felt natural.

Kaitani gazed at Fujiwara's sleeping countenance. When he touched the furrow between his brows, the crease softly disappeared. His stern visage vanished as well. His silky skin was soothing to the touch. Kaitani touched the slight redness next to his eyes. When he stroked his cheeks, Fujiwara hunched his shoulders as if he found it ticklish. He was so cute Kaitani wanted to eat him, so cute that it make his chest hurt.

Fujiwara squirmed and rolled over on his back, revealing his pink nipples. Over and over the previous night Kaitani teased them and toyed with them, nipples faintly tinted and small, yet growing erect when pinched, and then soft and yielding when he suckled them.

Kaitani covered Fujiwara's body with his own. He pushed aside his bangs and kissed his small forehead. He pinched his right nipple, producing a husky sigh. Licking it, the nipple came erect, and he kneaded it between his thumb and forefinger.

"Heavy—" Fujiwara muttered faintly.

Kaitani sat up. Fujiwara's eyelids fluttered and cracked open. He looked hazily up at him, his eyes not focusing. "Kaitani?" His voice was low and hoarse, the result of all the times the night before he'd cried out.

"G'morning. How are you feeling?"

"My head hurts." He gaze fell on Kaitani's right hand. "What are you pinching my nipple for?"

He spoke not in a sweet, cloying voice, but in the authoritative tones Kaitani had become accustomed to on a daily basis. All at once, he felt the real world crashing in on him. He hurriedly let go of Fujiwara's nipple.

"What were you doing that for?" he asked, his voice turning inquisitorial.

"Why . . . um . . . well . . . . " A little love-squeeze was his intent, but the way Fujiwara had posed the question, it was clearly something he shouldn't have been doing. Flustered, he lamely and awkwardly said, "There was . . . ah . . . um . . . a mosquito there."

Fujiwara swiveled his head from right to left, taking in the surroundings, which combing back his disheveled hair with his right hand. He started to sit up, groaned, and collapsed on the sheets.

"Are you all right?" Kaitani asked, placing his hand on his shoulder.

"It's nothing," he replied, immediately shaking him off.

Kaitani found himself a bit hurt by Fujiwara's brusk manner, a complete contrast to last night. His face contorted in pain, Fujiwara managed to come to a sitting position.

"Does your back hurt? Or your hips?"

"I told you, it's nothing," Fujiwara growled at him. He coughed several times, and pressed his hand to his throat. He bowed his head, and finally realized the current condition he was in. "Why don't I have any clothes on?" he muttered to himself. He turned on Kaitani. "And why are you naked, too?"

Fujiwara glared at him, brows furrowed, a fearsome look on his face.

"I, um, took your clothes off," Kaitani said in a small voice.

The furrows in Fujiwara's brows doubled in depth. "What I want to know is, what are you and I doing in bed together, naked?"

Kaitani's mind went blank, his thoughts tumbling into darkness. Fujiwara didn't recall anything from their lavish lovemaking. But even if he didn't remember, that didn't erase the fact that they'd had sex.

The voluptuous Fujiwara of the night before and the Fujiwara now were two different people. He was still beautiful and provocative, but different. This was the Fujiwara he saw every day at work—aloof, worlds apart from himself, the fastidious narcissist.

"How much of last night do you remember?" asked Kaitani, putting out a feeler before getting around to the truth.

Fujiwara leaned forward with a scowl and shook his head many times. "I was at the bar and drank something. Then I talked with some social climber and the bar owner treated me to a bitter-tasting cocktail. After that—after that—"

He didn't remember. Kaitani was sure of it. Last night's orgy of lovemaking had wrung them both dry, and he didn't remember a thing.

"Ah, last night, after getting pretty soused, the bar owner let you have the room in the back to rest. You've been here till now."

"If it was only to rest, then why take all my clothes off?"

He had a point. Kaitani labored to come up with a good excuse. "I, uh, didn't want your suit to get wrinkled."

"I could understand my suit or shirt, but the necessity of removing my underwear as well?"

Fujiwara scanned the room with a fierce expression. His attention fell on a spot on the floor. "Is that my clothing?"

He saw where Fujiwara's suit was balled into a soft pile by the door. Kaitani had no memory of

Fujiwara's taking his clothes off, that's probably where he dropped them.

"So to keep my suit from being wrinkled, you were so nice as to leave it there on the floor?"

The degree of anger he exhibited in stressing leave it there on the floor was intimidating. Fujiwara rolled over and started to climb off the bed. That movement alone, though, elicited a grunt of pain that caused him to buckle forward. Clenching his hands together, his body trembled.

"My backside is killing me," he muttered to himself, barely loud enough to hear. "Why the hell does my ass hurt?" Fujiwara raised his head and glared at Kaitani. "You've got to be kidding me—you bastard—"

Kaitani couldn't imagine how to respond. "I-I didn't. I didn't do anything like that," he said, his voice flustered and strained.

"You're lying. Then why's my rear end hurting so much? You got me drunk and then had your way with me."

Not under pain of death was Kaitani going to tell him the truth. Not about himself and none other than Fujiwara.

"If you're so bloody innocent, come up with a logical explanation for what I'm feeling."

Kaitani's brain was doing an exact reproduction of Edvard Munch's famous series of paintings, "The Scream." No matter the bedroom eyes Fujiwara had tempted him with, had provoked him with. They hadn't had sex. Fujiwara had been too stoned to remember.

But—but— The excuses piled up in his head.

Fujiwara even told him that he loved him. Kaitani had thought at first he must be mistaken, but then Fujiwara addressed him by his real name. Yet, no matter the truth, coming clean wouldn't mean a thing if Fujiwara had no memory of it himself. Far from it, he'd no doubt call Kaitani a liar.

"I think it's because you fell down and landed on your backside." Telling the lie almost brought Kaitani to tears.

Fujiwara's mouth turned down. "If I fell on my posterior, it would hurt on the outside. Why does it hurt on the inside?"

As he asked this question, Fujiwara's expression stiffed as suddenly doused with ice water. In the next moment, he held his head in his hands and cried, "Y-You used that?"

Used what? Kaitani wondered. Following Fujiwara's gaze, his eyes alighted on the sea anemone vibrator lying next to the wall. Kaitani's whole body broke out in a cold sweat. "I didn't use that. I wouldn't ever know how to use something like that."

"Use it? You just push it in, right?"

Now that he mentioned it up, that was probably what you did with it.

"You got me drunk, and took advantage of me while I was unconscious. You no doubt had yourself a good old time shoving that thing up my ass. Took a couple of pictures, too, I bet. More material to blackmail me with. All right, hand over the camera."

Not only was he falsely accusing Kaitani based only on his imagination, but then he doubled his hand into a fist and hit him so hard that the shock sent Kaitani sprawling.

"S-Stop it!" Kaitani jumped down from the bed, naked.

"Hold it right there!" said Fujiwara, starting after him. But when his feet touched the floor, his legs buckled beneath him and he collapsed on the spot. "Ow—damn!"

From the distressed look on his face, the pain was clearly enough to make him grit his teeth. His countenance suddenly changed to that of a weeping child. Big teardrops welled up and fell from his beautiful eyes.

"It hurts . . . it hurts . . . it hurts . . . . "

He threw himself on the floor and loudly blubbered like a little kid. If Kaitani told him that he hadn't been penetrated by the sea anemone vibrator, but by himself—no, he'd have to be out of his mind.

Somehow, he had to find his way through this minefield. As far as Fujiwara's ass was concerned, that it "hurt" was an established fact. Beyond that, it'd be best to establish that the cause of it was natural. The problem was what the cause was. Kaitani slapped himself on the face. Enough of cowardly half-measures! If he didn't come up with something a bit more convincing, none of these lies were going to fly.

"Y-Yesterday, I thought we'd just have a drink and head back, but Tomoharu got some strange notion into his head and put aphrodisiacs in your drink."

Fujiwara raised his tear-streaked face. "Aphrodisiacs—" he murmured.

"Yeah, you know, drugs that make you horny—"

"I know what aphrodisiacs are," Fujiwara snapped, interrupting him mid-sentence.

"By that point, you were pretty much dead drunk, but then the aphrodisiacs kicked in and, you, uh, got an incredible hard-on. I mean, you were suffering. So I, ah, lent you a hand."

Fujiwara stared unblinking at Kaitani.

"At first, I tried getting you off just with my hand, but those aphrodisiacs were really powerful and that wasn't enough. Considering the circumstances, I figured the best thing to do was give you the full treatment and finish off the job in one shot, so I, uh, put my finger—"

"Put your finger where?" Fujiwara interjected, when Kaitani's explanation faltered.

Kaitani looked up at Fujiwara from beneath his brows. "I diddled your ass with my finger."

Fujiwara held his head in his hands and screamed like a girl. "You stuck your finger inside of me?"

"J-Just a finger. Look, size-wise, a finger's smaller than a penis, right? Or are you crying your eyes out because you can't bear the fact that you had to get goosed to get off?" Kaitani lashed back at him.

The wicker basket flew at his face. Kaitani managed to snag it just before it hit him. "A bastard like you hasn't got a shred of delicacy in his body!" Fujiwara shrieked.

Kaitani cursed himself for not tossing the man in the corner. He drew himself to his full height and said, "Because delicacy's something I never had any need for!

Now get off your butt and get dressed! Unless you want to keep showing me your missing nut!"

Gritting his teeth, Fujiwara lurched to his feet like an old man. He picked up his clothes where they were strewn across the floor. Kaitani dressed as well, his fingers trembling slightly as he fastened the buttons. He knew he had to pull himself together. While getting dressed, he glanced over his shoulder several times, but Fujiwara clothed himself in silence.

When he'd dressed, and still without saying a word, Fujiwara left the room. Kaitani scrambled after him. Holding his briefcase under his arm, Fujiwara followed along the wall, slouching forward as he walked, hesitating every two or three steps and proceeding at a very measured pace. Kaitani wanted to help out, but the mood wasn't right for making such an offer.

Kaitani went next door to return the key. When he came out, Fujiwara had already hailed a taxi. Without a backward glance, the taxi sped away through the business district. In the early morning, the city was still devoid of life. Kaitani didn't have any cash on him, so he took the subway. At a little past eight o'clock, it would normally be in the middle of rush hour, but today was Saturday, and he was outbound rather than inbound, so the train wasn't crowded.

He was beat when he arrived back at his apartment. It was hot, but he didn't bother to turn on the air conditioner. He lay on the bed in his suit. His phone chimed, indicating incoming mail. It was from Higashiyama: "Tomoharu tells me that things went well with you and the Section Chief," he wrote. "If there's

any way I can help out, let me know. I'm rooting for you."

Kaitani couldn't think of a way to reply, and certainly not about "how well" it went, so he simply closed the message. When he thought about Fujiwara's frenzied state after he woke up, he felt some pangs of remorse. When Fujiwara assaulted him, it would have been better to tie him up and leave him there. Even if he got all whimpery because his hard-on hurt so badly, he wouldn't have remembered that after he woke up, either.

But because he seemed to be in so much pain, because he got so choked-up about it, and because he told Kaitani to touch him, and was groaning so seductively, and said he loved him—Kaitani shook his head back and forth like a wet dog. He hauled himself to his feet, took off his suit, and showered. Even while he was in the shower, everything would suddenly come back at him and he'd find himself drifting off. It was because he'd hardly slept at all last night, or so he told himself.

He put on shorts and a T-shirt and rummaged around in the refrigerator. There wasn't anything to eat, but there was a beer. Drinking a beer first thing in the morning bummed him out badly he hardly knew what to do with himself.

Look on the bright side of things, he told himself. You got to do something that felt good for a change, didn't you? After all, he'd gotten for free what he'd paid for plenty of times at the soaplands. But when he paid for it, he walked away with no strings attached, feeling like a new man, and nothing coming back to bite him. Now he felt anything but. Well, maybe the lower half of his body was enjoying the afterglow, but his heart felt like it'd been dragged through the mud and dumped in a ditch.

Then he remembered something. Kaitani booted up his computer, and opened the file he'd named "XX." In the file were the ten or so spread-eagle crotch shots of Fujiwara. He opened them one by one. He'd given the testicle-and-head angle a lot of attention, but up until now, he hadn't taken a close look at the photos. He hadn't been interested. He hadn't wanted to.

The white thighs, the unguarded countenance. A fleeting glimpse of his modest aspects, and of his ravenous side. Thinking about penetrating him over and over, Kaitani gulped loudly. For the time being, he was getting hard enough that he needed to pleasure himself.

He closed his eyes and worked his right hand. In a low voice, he panted, Anna, Anna, over and over. The two of them might be oil and water, but those bewitching bedroom eyes—he ejaculated his lust into a tissue, wadded it up and tossed it in the trash. Slumped against the computer desk, he sighed.

When he imagined Fujiwara remembering even a fraction of the previous night's activity, his chest didn't hurt quite as much.

Chapter 16

Monday was as depressing as always, but this morning was all the more so. Kaitani stared at himself in the bathroom mirror and blankly muttered to himself, "I don't want to go to work today." He put off leaving the apartment until the very last minute, but he couldn't take a day off just because he felt like shit.

He arrived at Cavi five minutes before the hour. Still having no desire to go to the office, he was hanging around the entranceway when Osada came up behind him and gave him a nudge. "Hey, get a move on," she said. He slumped forward and went inside.

Kaitani slouched his way to his desk. By the time he'd put down his satchel, the morning meeting was starting; he hurried over to the white board on the far wall of the office. Fujiwara was standing some little ways off, and by facing forward, Kaitani didn't have to look at his face.

"Kaitani," a small voice said to him in the middle of the meeting.

When Kaitani glanced over his shoulder, Osada, standing next to Fujiwara, gestured to him. Their eyes met, so he couldn't very well ignore her. He nodded and went up to her.

"Sorry to do this in the middle of the meeting, but what's the status of the survey results for June's new product sales growth campaign?"

"That's—I'm still tabulating the results."

"Still tabulating? Do you know how dated those surveys are? This is hard for me to accept. I want to see the brand loyalty results before close of business today."

"Yes, I'm sorry."

He'd completely forgotten about it, and it was natural she'd be upset, but this was making things so much worse. Standing here chatting right next to Fujiwara was hell. It only confirmed that he was the kind of employee who was always late to work, always doing things in a slipshod way. He cast a glance at the man next to her, but as always, Fujiwara looked straight ahead in that cool, disinterested manner, as if he hadn't heard a thing she'd said.

The meeting ended. Kaitani returned to his desk and booted up his computer. When he checked his email, there was a new message from Section Chief Fujiwara in the inbox. Suddenly, he was shaking down to the tips of his fingers. The topic line said, "About the next meeting." Checking to make sure no one was reading over his shoulder, he greedily devoured the message.

"Today (August 1), starting at three P.M., there will be a special meeting about the new cosmetics line. Please print out the attached materials . . . ."

So, it really was about the next meeting. He felt drained by the time he finished reading. Scanning this email that had nothing to do with his personal feelings, he had to wonder what he'd been expecting.

Kaitani spent the time until three o'clock tabulating the results from the growth surveys for Osada

and doing paperwork. At two-fifty, he left the office even before Fujiwara so as not to be late to the meeting. While he was up, he figured he might as well go to the lavatory. He placed the packet of materials on the shelf next to the sink and quickly used the facilities

He finished up and was tucking himself back in when he sensed that someone had entered the room. Casting a nonchalant glance over his shoulder, he saw Fujiwara's face and his back stiffened. When Fujiwara understood that Kaitani was there, he stopped in the doorway, turned on his heels, and left.

The moment was awkward for him, but that it was awkward for Fujiwara, too— Feeling all woolly-headed, Kaitani headed for the conference room. He got there five minutes before the meeting was scheduled to begin. He sat down, leaving one seat between himself and Fujiwara. He wanted to sit farther apart, but the seating for Sales Promotion and R&D was prearranged, so he could only go so far.

Everybody had assembled at the appointed time, and the meeting began under Osada's direction. The lotion and the dragon design were both formally approved. They were really going forward with the dragon design, Kaitani thought. The changes he managed to coerce had come about, yet he still had his doubts.

"I have come to this decision out of respect for all of your opinions. However, there are several matters that still concern me." He remained seated, speaking in a tone of voice colder and more severe than normal, leaving the distinct impression that he, in fact, detested the way things had turned out. "Hence, rather than simply rubber-stamping this decision, these concerns must be addressed and hopefully alleviated. Primarily, in order to position this product apart from the competition, I believe the wholesale price must be driven down at least thirty yen."

This caused a stir of conversation around the table. Higashiyama raised his hand. "Considering the tight conditions we're already working under, isn't it asking a bit much to go for even more cost reductions? Anything R&D can contribute in that regard isn't going to amount to much. There are limits to the prices we can negotiate on raw materials. It'd be pretty difficult to try and reduce the wholesale price that way."

"I'm not only referring to the cost of raw materials. There are many areas where savings can be made. Over the next two or three days, I will estimate cutbacks and distribute goals to each department. Before the next meeting, please do your best to reach them, and make your calculations available as well."

The meeting lasted until the one-hour mark and then broke up. Kaitani waited for Fujiwara to leave. When he was the last one there, Kaitani got up from his chair, inadvertently knocking his things on the floor. He crouched down to pick them up, and peering under the table, he noticed a handkerchief lying there. It was under the chair right where the Section Chief had been sitting. Even supposing it'd been dropped there, it wasn't necessarily his. Somebody using the room previously may have dropped it.

Kaitani picked up the plainly-colored handkerchief with the feeling he'd seen it somewhere

before. When he unfolded it, that distinct aroma wafted up, an odor that could only have come from the Section Chief.

He flashed back to that overpowering night; Fujiwara lying disheveled in his arms, his cloying voice calling out his name. All at once, Kaitani's heart started beating fast. He was at work, right in the corporate headquarters, and he was getting an erection.

He folded up the handkerchief and tucked it into his suit coat pocket. He'd return it, he thought, as soon as he got back to the office. But he didn't go up to the Section Chief's desk. I've got to give it back, got to give it back, he thought over and over as the evening drew near. Around closing, Fujiwara left.

After the meeting, while he was preoccupied with the handkerchief, he hadn't made any headway with his work; it left him no choice but to put in overtime. Osada put a sheet of paper down in front of him. "This is for you. Your cost-cutting targets. Because the design involves the entire bottle, it's going to be tough, but give it your best shot."

Osada wasn't kidding. The cost-cutting targets for the container were pretty damned steep. He had to think Fujiwara was trying to tick him off on purpose.

"I'll try my best," he answered, half-heartedly.

"You're not a happy camper," Osada sighed. "But didn't the design you were championing get selected?

The design he'd campaigned for? Rather, the design that Fujiwara had selected only under duress. "Sure," Kaitani said, with a wry smile.

"You've been pretty uptight at work lately. What do you do to relax?"

All sorts . . . of things. But nothing he wanted to discuss with other people.

"Come to think about it, the Section Chief doesn't seem to be in a very good mood, either. He left early today."

Simply at the mention of the man's name, like a switch thrown somewhere in his brain, Kaitani got butterflies in his stomach. "He isn't feeling well?"

"You didn't hear it from me, but hadn't he looked pretty green around the edges all day? He always seems to be in such great shape, so you have to wonder if something's wrong."

Kaitani had taken a good enough look at the Section Chief to comment on the subject. But hearing that he appeared unwell, Kaitani suddenly grew concerned. "I should probably get going."

As he noisily cleared off his desk, Osada muttered, "Getting going? You done here?"

"Uh, I'll finish up at home."

That excuse seemed to fly, and he left the office. He didn't take the train back to his apartment, but instead headed in the opposite direction, to Fujiwara's place. Watching the unfamiliar landscape, listening to the clattering of the tracks, taking in the swaying of the train cars, he wondered what he was going to do. When the train arrived at the station and he exited the turnstiles, he finally came to his senses.

By the time he got to the apartment building, the stated reason he came here was beginning to sound like a joke. Fujiwara wouldn't even let him up to his room. What was he doing hanging around a place like this?

After exiting the station and before he'd gone a dozen steps, he stopped and bought a return ticket. He picked up some takeout, went back to his apartment, settled down and plowed through the office work he'd brought home. By the time he was finished, it was past eleven. He saved the file and shut off the computer. Before crawling into bed, he retrieved a porno magazine from beneath the mattress. No matter how current the latest issue, this edition he always kept around. The models and photo spreads aligned well with his tastes, but they didn't turn him on at all. He'd tried the same thing yesterday as well, to no avail.

He dragged himself out of bed, booted up the computer, and opened the XX file. His midnight friend didn't perk up right away, but his pulse began to pound.

The truth was truly mortifying, but facts were facts and he'd have to accept things for what they were. The lower half of his body in a half-aroused state, he got back in bed. He remembered the handkerchief from that afternoon and retrieved it from his suit coat pocket. He brought it up to his nose and drank in the lingering sweet odor. His half-aroused member came to attention and hardened. He sniffed at the handkerchief and masturbated. The image of those erotic, bewitching eyes flashed through his mind.

Milking himself until he was practically numb from the pleasure, his mood grew all the darker. With his physical sensations running away from his rational mind by three or four lengths, Kaitani couldn't decide whether this was love, or infatuation, or something else.

THE MAN WHO DOESN'T TAKE OFF HIS CLOTHES

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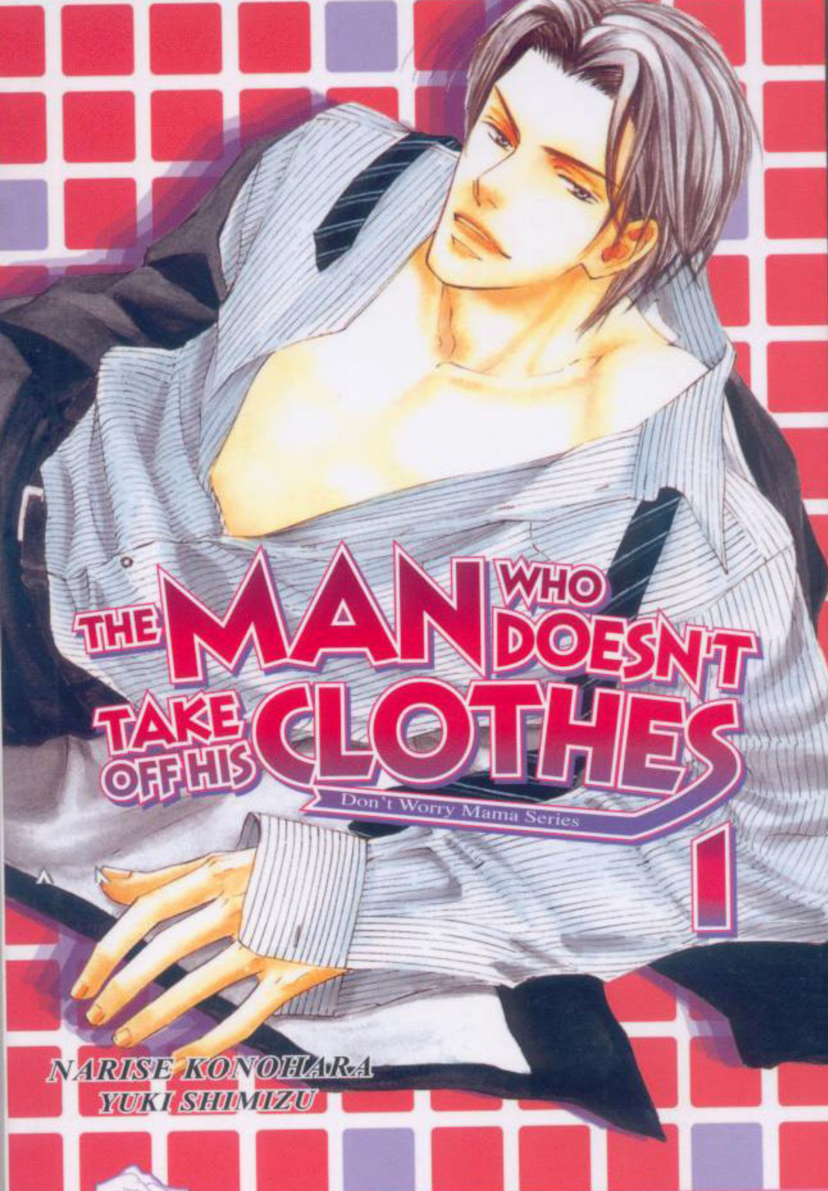
2

Coming
Spring 2007



THE MAN WHO DOESN'T TAKE OFF HIS CLOTHES

Don't Worry Mama Series

1

NARISE KONOHARA
YUKI SHIMIZU

June
Yaoi Novel